The Hudson Review

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The Point of View of a Stranger

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Iris—a long poem

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Myths and Mishegaas: Graves and Riding

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The Brothers, Complete

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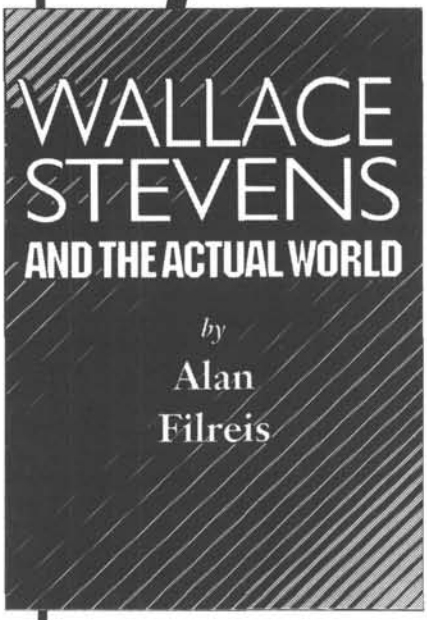

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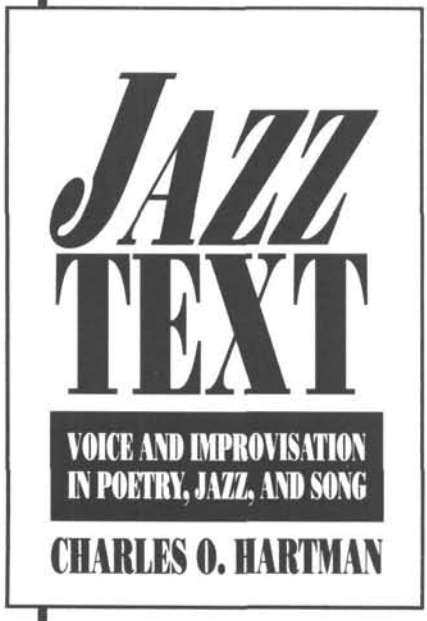

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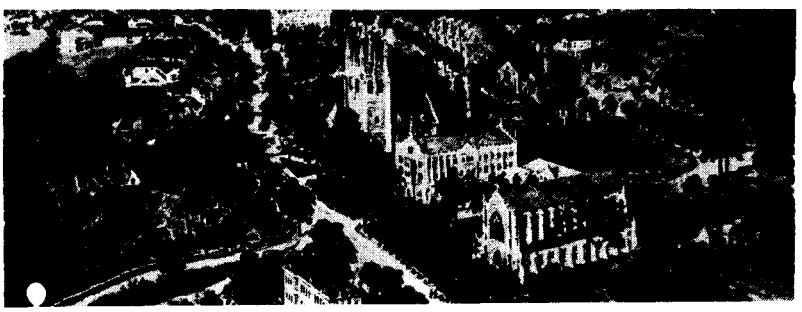

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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

VOLUME XLIV NUMBER 2 SUMMER 1991

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TO OUR READERS

A new book of poems by an Advisory Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. He is also the editor of a new poetry anthology. In accordance with our policy, the books will not be reviewed in these pages, but are listed below for the interest of our readers:

DANA GIOIA: *The Gods of Winter.* Graywolf Press. $9.95p.

DANA GIOIA, ed.: *New Italian Poets: A Bilingual Anthology of Influential Italian Writers.* Story Line Press. $16.95p.

In David Dooley's Poetry Chronicle in our Spring 1991 issue the title of a book by Charles Simic was given incorrectly. It is *The World Doesn't End*, not *World Without End.*

Publication of this issue of THE HUDSON REVIEW is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal Agency, and by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts. We wish to express our appreciation to these organizations for their generosity.

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THE HUDSON REVIEW is published quarterly by The Hudson Review, Inc., 684 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10021. It is a member of The Council of Literary Magazines, and is indexed in the Social Sciences and Humanities Index and in the American Humanities Index. Book reviews are indexed in Book Review Index, and poems in Index of American Periodical Verse.

Individual subscription $20.00 per year in U. S.; foreign including Canada $24.00. Single copy $6.00. Special rate for bulk orders. U. S. A. Newsstand Distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky, Ohio 44870. Library subscriptions in England: Periodicals Division, B. H. Blackwell Ltd., P. O. Box 40, Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford. Back issues and reprints of Volumes I—XLII available from AMS Press, Inc., 56 East 13th Street, New York, N. Y. 10003. Microfilms of Volumes I—XLII available from University Microfilms, Inc., 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106. We handle directly all requests for permission to photocopy.

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Unsolicited mss will be read according to the following schedule: *Nonfiction*: January 1 through March 31, and October 1 through December 31; *Poetry*: April 1 through September 30; *Fiction*: June 1 through November 30. Unsolicited mss received at other times will be returned unread. Manuscripts submitted by subscribers who so identify themselves will be read throughout the year. Manuscripts will not be returned nor will inquiries be answered unless accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. No responsibility is assumed for their loss or injury.

Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Editors.

Printed in the United States of America. Second Class postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to THE HUDSON REVIEW, 684 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10021. Registered U. S. Patent Office.

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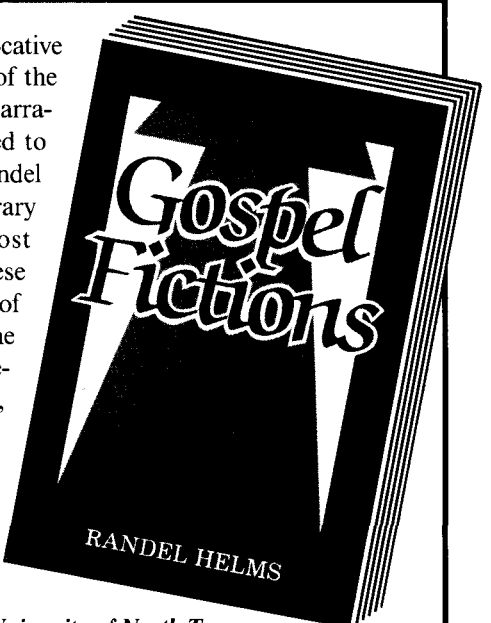
by Randel Helms

According to this provocative book, the four Gospels of the New Testament are fictional narratives—idealistic writings produced to serve a theological vision. Randel Helms uses the method of literary analysis to examine the most familiar and powerful of these fictions as literature: the stories of Christ's birth, his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, his betrayal by Judas, his crucifixion, death, and resurrection.

Randel Helms, a noted biblical scholar, is professor of English at Arizona State University.



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Letters to the Editors

Dear Editors:

Your Winter 1991 issue carries remarks by Monroe K. Spears which wildly misconstrue my book, *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter.* In particular, he characterizes the book as a kind of New Formalist polemic, "a full-dress exposition of the poetics of the [New Formalist] movement," and says of this alleged exposition: "To portray formalism, or its revival, as *new*, Steele must ignore the considerable number of first-rate American poets who have been writing formal (and often also quasi-formal and free) verse since the Second World War." For the record, I never so much as mention "New Formalism" in the entire book. As the title of the book indicates, its subject is the revolt against meter, a revolt that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Furthermore, I never suggest—and never would—that formalism or its revival is new. Indeed, my views are precisely the opposite of those that Mr. Spears attributes to me. Since he has raised this issue and has stated that I propound a position on it that I simply do not and would not propound, permit me to repeat remarks I made (*Crosscurrents*, Winter 1989, pp. 103–104) when I was asked for an opinion about the current interest in form:

> To say that meter and form are coming back is misleading, because they never really went away. Through difficult and fragmented times, Richard Wilbur, Philip Larkin, and Thom Gunn have written, each in his own way, with beauty and integrity. Their poems are widely known and rightly treasured, and will loom larger and larger in our language as time passes. Anthony Hecht and W. D. Snodgrass have also produced distinguished bodies of work that have attracted well-deserved admiration. J. V. Cunningham has supplied us with his brilliant epigrams and essays, though these are not nearly as well known as they should be; the same must be said of the poems of Louise Bogan and Janet Lewis. And Edgar Bowers, Henri Coulette, Charles Gullans, and X. J. Kennedy have all in the past twenty years written outstanding work in meter, work too often overlooked. If we now have a hearteningly varied and talented group of young poets drawing attention to and reviving traditions of versification, we also should recognize those poets who have kept the traditions alive when fashion and ignorance obscured them.

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Though there are many other points that I should like to address, I shall limit myself in closing to Mr. Spears's assertion that I make the "assumption that free verse is illegitimate." I assume no such thing. As I state in the introduction to my book, "I am keenly aware of the complexities of the questions this book examines and of the fact that there is no absolutely right or wrong way of resolving them. I entertain no hard and fast definition of poetry itself, nor do I think that such definitions contribute to the health of the art."

It is easy for a critic to explode arguments that an author never made and to convict him of designs he never undertook. Criticism itself, however, is poorly served by this practice, and it is disappointing that Mr. Spears felt obliged to adopt it.

Los Angeles, California TIMOTHY STEELE

Monroe K. Spears replies:

I see now that my sentence beginning, "To portray formalism, or its revival, as *new*. . . ," is imprecise and misleading, since it appears to assume that Mr. Steele's intention is to "portray" formalism. I certainly did not mean, here or elsewhere, to suggest that Mr. Steele deliberately intended to express the beliefs of the New Formalists as a group.

In calling his book an "exposition of the poetics of the movement" I was discussing *Missing Measures* in the context of *Expansive Poetry*, which contains an essay by Mr. Steele which is a shorter version of much of the argument of *Missing Measures*; and *Expansive Poetry* certainly presents the New Formalism as a movement. I was also influenced by the dust jacket of *Missing Measures*, which stresses Mr. Steele's connection with the New Formalism and concludes, "*Missing Measures* provides a vital movement with a brilliant critical statement." While I did not mean to suggest that Mr. Steele intended to expound any views other than his own, I should still defend my phrase, on the evidence of *Expansive Poetry* alone, as an accurate description.

I am pleased to find that Mr. Steele so emphatically denies that there is anything new about the New Formalism, and that he approves of more modern formalists than his book suggested. I am also pleased that he denies that he thinks free verse illegitimate, though his book certainly made it clear that he is opposed to it, whatever term of disapprobation may be used. Pound and Eliot, he says, in their confusion, legitimized free verse, with most unfortunate consequences, which they came to regret. "This legitimization of free verse was important for the modernists" (p. 65). "But it might have been

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useful if, at some point in the modern movement, people had set aside the question of whether free verse was poetry and examined the more modest issue of whether it was verse, which by definition is, or at least used to be, speech reconciled to measure" (p. 285). To interpret such passages, together with the thrust of the whole argument, as involving an assumption that free verse is illegitimate does not seem to me unfair.

But I am happy to find that he makes no such assumption, and that we can agree on the basic issue. My essay was intended as an exercise in peacemaking in the controversy between formalists and anti-formalists, promoting reconciliation and acceptance, or at least tolerance, on both sides. I should be sorry to see it wind up in recrimination.

Dear Editors:

Since I usually enjoy Bert Cardullo's film criticism, I was puzzled and dismayed by some of Mr. Cardullo's remarks in your Winter 1991 issue, apparently prompted by the film *Longtime Companion.*

First, the "causers of AIDS" were not sexually promiscuous gay men. AIDS is caused by a virus. Men with multiple sex partners unknowingly hastened the spread of the disease, but the disease did not arise spontaneously as a result of, or as a punishment for, sexual promiscuity.

Second, while Mr. Cardullo says he does not object to government funding for AIDS research, he apparently objects to homosexuals lobbying for those funds. Government funding for AIDS research makes sense in purely economic terms, even putting aside all humanitarian concerns for people who are suffering. Our economy loses millions of dollars when citizens who would otherwise be productive for many years require prolonged medical care and then die at an early age. Even now, the government spends less money on AIDS research than on cancer research, since much of the AIDS funding goes for educational programs.

Finally, and most significantly, Mr. Cardullo speaks of "homosexuals' wishful image of themselves as a superior, victimized minority." Forget "superior." How could gay men and lesbians who are not brain dead *not* know they belong to a victimized minority? Surely Mr. Cardullo is aware of the civil disabilities against homosexuals in this country: the inability to marry (and thus secure the concomitant property, inheritance, and insurance rights granted to married heterosexuals); the illegality of same-sex lovemaking in many states; hate crimes against gays; the enormous social pressures against acknowledging one's homosexual orientation publicly. If a society fails to

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support, and indeed vigorously seeks to block, the attempts of men and women to lead conventional lives with same-sex partners, should that society be surprised when some homosexuals behave in irrational and self-destructive ways? Is Mr. Cardullo married? If so, has he ever described his wife as his roommate or his cousin and pretended to his colleagues that there has never been any sexual connection between them? When Mr. Cardullo and others like him have joined the fight to end all civil discrimination against gay men and women, and that fight has been won, then he will have earned the right to lecture gay men about the dangers of promiscuity.

When boy takes boy and girl takes girl to the senior prom, with full approval from parents, school system, and heterosexual students, homosexuals will no longer be a victimized minority.

San Antonio, Texas DAVID DOOLEY

Bert Cardullo replies:

I have several questions and responses for David Dooley:

1. Does he think that *Longtime Companion* is a good *film*, or a good promoter of the homosexual cause? Or does he not care about this distinction? I do, since I'm a film critic, not a social engineer.
2. I do not object to homosexuals' lobbying for funding for AIDS research; I object to their doing it in the name of art.
3. If homosexuals did not cause AIDS, their peculiar form of promiscuity fostered its spread. Mr. Dooley says that "AIDS is caused by a virus," not by sexually promiscuous gay men. Yes, but how did that virus find its way to the homosexual population above all others? (And no, I obviously do not believe that AIDS is a form of divine retribution against homosexuals for their "sinful" behavior; the issue here, as I tried to point out in my review [which, if he can put his own prejudices aside for a moment, Mr. Dooley should carefully reread], is biology, not morality.)
4. I have every right "to lecture gay men about the dangers of promiscuity," since their promiscuity endangers not only their own health but also the health of many others, and since my tax dollars help fund AIDS research (after a cure is found, I wouldn't want another strain of the virus to spread as a result of homosexuals' return to their promiscuous ways).
5. I won't forget the adjective "superior," as Mr. Dooley counsels. Like other victimized groups, homosexuals have come to relish

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their victimized status, to use it as a cudgel with which to beat *all* heterosexuals, whether prejudiced against them or not.

6. Thanks for the information that homosexual promiscuity is a response to the illegality of homosexual marriage. May I assume by analogy that heterosexual promiscuity is a response to the *legality* of heterosexual marriage?
7. Homosexuals have every right to be protected from discriminatory actions, but they have no right to "full approval" from heterosexual society. Despite the efforts of the politically correct, you still can't legislate people's thoughts in this country.
8. Since Mr. Dooley asks if I'm married, may I ask if he's homosexual? No, I'm not married, but I plan to live with my girlfriend this summer in unwedded (and perhaps illegal!) bliss. See, I'm not so conservative after all.

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HAROLD FROMM

Myths and Mishegaas: Robert Graves and Laura Riding

Now that Robert Graves has settled into literary history (after a long, flourishing career that effectively ended some years before his death in 1985 at the age of ninety), the evidence would seem to suggest that his literary stock is on the down escalator, its value having had as much to do with his extraordinary prolificity ("170 entries found" was the frightening report of my library's computer) as with his actual working presence. Martin Seymour-Smith's critical biography of 1982 (published in the U.S. in 1983) consisted of one sufficiently fleshy volume, and since it alternated between informative chapters containing well-considered readings of Graves's works and chapters throwing fistfuls of unassimilated raw data at the bewildered and bored reader, the effect it produced was of a strong-minded, utilitarian, and industrious sourcebook with little pretension to high art (though judicious pruning would have made it more readable).[1] His narrative voice was rough and ready, but only moderately distanced from the Gravesian world in which Seymour-Smith had been an important participant, so while he sometimes managed to be decisively critical, at other times he could be excessively admiring.

Richard Perceval Graves, as a nephew of Robert, acquired still another kind of insider's advantage and perspective, as well as large masses of rich archival materials written by members of his penetratingly articulate family, materials unavailable to Seymour-Smith. "When my father John Graves (Robert's brother) died in January 1980," Richard Perceval reports, "I inherited from him thousands of items dating from the 1790s onwards: chiefly letters, but also diaries, personal memoirs,

[1] Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (New York, 1982).

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family trees, portraits and photographs."[2] The publication of Seymour-Smith's biography just as Graves started on his own was initially daunting, but Graves recovered quickly enough so that four years later he was able to produce the first instalment—*Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic, 1895–1926*—of what looks to be a three-volume life.[3] Although this promises to be almost twice as long as Seymour-Smith's, Graves has managed to assimilate an immense quantity of information into a consummately deft narrative. As a result, particularly in the second volume, *The Years with Laura: 1926–1940*, the story feels completely fresh and new, even though Seymour-Smith had already surveyed similar territory. While it is ultimately questionable whether Robert Graves warrants such extended attention in his own right, the work more than justifies itself in its own demanding terms as biographical art and literary history. The prose is ultra "clean"—a classical but contemporary English—ever so much more transparent than one is accustomed to in these days of academic heavy weather; there is scarcely a single sentence whose syntax elicits hesitation or reconstrual; and Richard Graves's moment-to-moment consciousness of the structural configuration of his grand narrative is so masterly that one has little sense of its having been pieced together from thousands of bits of data. Indeed, by the middle of Volume II, one has already recognized the self-effacing brilliance of his skill. Moreover, Graves preserves the intensity of his drama by wisely avoiding extended critical discussions that might weaken its force.

The first volume provided the detailed background of Robert's family history, offering the view that his mother's Germanic inheritance as a von Ranke provided (to paraphrase Richard Graves) an iron constitution, a robust spirit, and "a high-minded and rather narrow idealism" that warred with other elements of Robert's personality. From the Graveses came his charm and warmth, his love of words (his father was a well-known poet and lyricist), his capacity for hard work, his cool arrogance, and his volatile pysche. Yet in *Good-Bye To All*

[2] ROBERT GRAVES: The Years with Laura, 1926–1940, by *Richard Perceval Graves*. Viking. $24.95. P. xviii.

[3] ROBERT GRAVES: The Assault Heroic, 1895–1926, by *Richard Perceval Graves*. Penguin. $12.95p.

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That, Robert Graves characterizes the Graveses as "cold" and "anti-sentimental," castigating his father (unfairly) for neglecting him, and speaking of the von Rankes' "goodness of heart." These shifting family characterizations have become a fixture of Graves criticism because of the need to account for Robert's own striking psychological contradictions. But one could as easily insist that both families display their own antinomies. Robert's mother, so indisputably influential, herself was a mixture of rigidly pious conventionality and ever-accommodating maternal warmth. And Robert, suffering as an odd-ball during his almost paradigmatic years of English "public school" education, learned how to marshal his own dualities, outwitting tormenting classmates by an ingenious mixture of public boxing skill on the one hand and, on the other, the solitary writing of poetry as a form of self-therapy (a role that poetry played for the rest of his life).

The Great War played *its* lifelong part too. Robert Graves received almost fatal wounds while serving in the trenches, but he persisted in returning to the front in France until his superiors would no longer permit it. Yet confronting his seemingly intrepid warrior side was always an aversion to masculine domination and an unworldly, highly-strung sensitivity: the effects of shell shock and the trauma of his proximity to gory death in the senseless destruction of an entire generation of young men were something he never overcame. Years afterward, riding on trains or even speaking on the telephone would unleash recollections that eventually led him into psychotherapy. Though he thought the exorcizing creation of *Good-Bye To All That* would eliminate the war from his writing and psyche, it continually resurfaced in other guises, like the battle scenes that abound in his novels about earlier times. Much, perhaps most, of his writing was the offspring of a rigorously classical education that turned him into a proficient scholar of Latin and Greek, and fueled poems, mythologies, critical essays, and novels of impressive learning. But the conflict between his classical aesthetic and his need to face up to mankind's animal violence was destined to cause problems in the tone and point of view of his writings.

Most of these conflicts are only too concretely enacted in the tumultuous and nonplussing pages of Richard Graves's *The*

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Years with Laura, and the catalyst that sets some of them off is a fragmentation bomb known variously as Laura Reichenthal, Laura Gottschalk, Laura Riding, and (in the volume yet to come) Laura (Riding) Jackson. Although Mrs. Jackson (still hurling thunderbolts at ninety) has been known to write scathing letters to literary journals and newspapers when she is not correctly named (parentheses and all), the operating term during the period in question was "Laura Riding."

Riding was born in Brooklyn, N.Y. in 1901 (Graves in 1895) to an immigrant Jewish family. She married early, spent several years at Cornell, got involved with the *Fugitive* poets—Ransom, Tate, Davidson and others—and was often published in their Nashville journal, receiving a good deal of admiration from its inner circle, as well as outsiders. Ambitious, aggressive, omniscient, opinionated, seductive, unstoppable, she bulldozed her way into literary circles, had an affair with Tate, divorced Gottschalk early on, corresponded with Robert Graves, and quickly took up his invitation to pay him and his wife, Nancy Nicholson, a visit in England in 1926 as a literary assistant. Upon which the entire family, including Laura, left for Cairo, where Robert managed to teach at the university for a few extremely uncongenial months before resigning. Robert's marriage of eight years had been deteriorating for some time, but the establishment of a threesome seems to have done more good than harm. Riding took imperious control of Graves, serving as both lover and mentor, but also freeing Nancy to care for their four children. In fact, Laura and Nancy were rather fond of each other. The threesome soon turned to four when Geoffrey Phibbs, an admiring poet, was virtually summoned from Ireland by Riding to join the existing ménage in London, where they had settled on returning from Cairo. Riding, already losing sexual interest in Graves, took up with Phibbs, but when Phibbs fell in love with Nancy, Laura jumped from a fourth-story window (fifth by American reckoning) and was almost fatally smashed up. Surgical skill enabled her to survive as a semi-invalid, going off to settle in Mallorca with Robert while Nancy continued to live with Phibbs and the children. After several years there, the Spanish Civil War forced Riding and Graves to live variously in England and on the Continent, always surrounded by a coterie of writers and

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intellectuals (often sharing the same household) and the concomitant sexual/emotional tensions that such arrangements inevitably produce.

By the late thirties, the relationship between Riding and Graves was laboring under a network of radical psychological antagonisms, although neither of them tended to acknowledge it (except in a thinly veiled hostility in their fiction and poems), and Robert remained her perennially awed subject, taking the kind of extensive abuse on which he seemed to thrive. But as a result of a few interchanges of letters between Laura and Schuyler Jackson, an American poetry critic for *Time*, a trip to the U.S. was engineered by Laura during which, as she anticipated and designed, she fell in love with Jackson (while Robert did likewise with Beryl Pritchard—who had, unfortunately, just been married to Alan Hodge), precipitating his wife's madness and the Jacksons' ultimate divorce. The connection with Graves collapsed and both eventually married their new lovers.

But a summary of this sort fails to provide even a clue to the almost unbelievable nature of the Riding-Graves liaison, because for Robert Graves, whose life and creativity were falling apart after the Great War, Laura Riding was salvation itself, serving his need for a ruthless female director, a goddess or "Muse," to nourish and channel his scattered energies and talents. "Suddenly he was held in the highest possible regard by a being who was not only the woman he loved, but a manifestation of divine authority and perfection." Laura Riding, however little known she may be today, was nonetheless one of a handful of the most powerful (in every sense) figures in early twentieth-century Anglo-American literary history. Her plenipotent intellect and personality swept away all resistance, reducing to discipleship, abject servility, or virtual madness anyone who could not manage to shake him/herself free from her mesmerizing, tyrannical influence. Her most subjective responses to experience were translated (by her as well as her followers) into world-historical imperatives and aesthetic universals, while her insight into the multiple layers of human personality enabled her to manipulate everyone around her intellectually, emotionally, and sexually. (By twisting a few knobs on her psychological instrument-panel, she could tweak the emotional chemistry of practically anyone she ever knew,

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initiating or poisoning intellectual and erotic affairs at will.) She told Geoffrey Phibbs "that she was more than human. They could think of her, if they liked, as a goddess; she was certainly a figure of destiny, or (as she herself preferred to say) she embodied 'Finality.'" When she lost sexual interest in Graves, she announced that sexual intercourse was passé and that bodies had had their day.

Graves's first wife, Nancy, was another strong-minded woman—an avowed feminist—who refused to be subjected by men and whom Robert scarcely dared to criticize. But because she was not an intellectual, she could not begin to supply the literary and creative motivation he required. Once the new union was established, however, Riding and Graves poured out literary products—singly and jointly—from a conveyor belt with no end in sight. Poems, essays, novels, literary criticism and theory, philosophico-political manifestoes for saving humanity from World War II—the output was extraordinary. Riding's astringently philosophical poems exerted an influence on Auden (who was then despised for his borrowings, since she herself never caught on as a poet) and the New Critics carefully took in Graves and Riding's *Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), whose close reading of Shakespeare set the model for Empson and his followers while promulgating the view of a poem as an autotelic, self-existent substance unbeholden to the outside world or to history. It was history, in fact, that Laura Riding was hell-bent on escaping or subverting—not through suicide, necessarily, but through the rigorous mental and artistic discipline that was expected to lead to eternal verity.

Yet not everyone was a convert. Two of Robert's remarkably forebearing sisters could appreciate Laura's unique gifts while simultaneously regarding her "as a borderline mental case." "Of course [one of them wrote] they're all completely insane—but G[eoffrey] & N[ancy] seem to me to be the saner couple of the two. They see L[aura] as selfish, egotistical & domineering—wishing to possess the entire personality of anyone she likes. . . . L[aura] calls herself 'Finality' whatever that may mean." The word that keeps coming to mind is "demonic," and some people even considered her a witch. Yet Robert could tell his sister that "one cannot talk of there being any good in Laura [i.e., *any* good would be too little]. She is seamless, like the

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garment of Christ." Robert's parents were subjected to repeated anguish and suffering, because Laura encouraged Robert's latent ruthlessness. Their shared megalomania required him to cast off all the Victorian self-suppressions that had controlled him as a youth, quite literally leaving father and mother to follow his unseamly Christ. As replacement for his former Christian piety he became an increasingly blunt, outspoken, and obnoxious antibourgeois rebel. Some of the letters to his parents, his wife, and even confreres like T. S. Eliot, are nothing short of vicious. Thus, despite Richard Perceval Graves's fondness for his uncle, Robert Graves comes off in Volume II as an almost completely unmitigated bastard.

It was at the beginning of his first volume that Richard Graves prepared us with a list of Robert's mature operating beliefs. Although most of these were fuzzily latent in his earliest, most unworldly, doings and writings, it required the ruthless intellectuality of Riding to bring them to functional potency. She might not have been equally enthusiastic about every item on Richard Graves's list, and she would have understood them in a somewhat different sense, but she would largely have endorsed the beliefs that

> organized religion is the enemy of freedom; that the world is a stranger and more magical place than appears at first sight; that Poetry itself is a modified descendant of primitive magic; that ordinary perception and formal logic have their limits, and that beyond them lies a timeless land which is quite at odds with conventional life; that society had once been matriarchal, and that many of our present ills could be attributed to the fact that men now ruled instead of women; that literal truth is relatively unimportant, as an artist can tell the truth by a condensation and dramatization of the facts; and that there are areas in which intellectual thought is markedly inferior to associative or 'analeptic' thought.

Without sacrificing his own particular affective and intellectual dualities, Graves was able to incorporate those of Riding. But some of the suppressions and recalibrations her metaphysical toughness enforced on his writing may very well have enabled—while also wrenching askew—much of what he produced under her surveillance, even though his writing expressed a radically different personality from hers, one that

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thrived on submission rather than domination and on poetry rather than philosophy. He believed that experience—not thought—was the basis of poetry, while Riding strove to eliminate the personal if it was not also abstractly universal. Still, his post-Riding works are frequently disparaged.

The departure of Riding and Graves to Mallorca in 1929 was in fact their farewell to English society and the modern world, a world of industrialism, politics, English rationalism, and bourgeois savagery that they loathed as much as D. H. Lawrence. Graves preferred the timeless "one story and one story only" of White Goddess mythology and Riding preferred the "Monoton" (to use the term from her poem, "The Quids") of absolute platonic-philosophical truth. Graves's autobiography covering the years leading to this emigration, *Good-Bye To All That*, first published in 1929 and then substantially revised for the 1957 edition because of its hasty, careless, and often indiscreet writing, was the first of the popular blockbusters he claimed to have written mostly for money. Yet despite its sporadic power and éclat, it provides a foretaste of almost all of the weaknesses to be found in Graves's later output. Although it must head any list of books about the Great War because of its gory, horrifying picture of trench warfare, both factually (as Graves concedes) and emotionally it is very unreliable. Its narrating persona—cocky, satirical, insouciant—was strongly influenced by Samuel Butler's mockery of Victorian middle-class morality. But it creates a radical disjunction between the horrors of the events and the comedy of the telling that is very unsettling. (Paul Fussell examines the book principally as comedy and caricature in *The Great War and Modern Memory*.) Furthermore, Graves's remarkably chatty fluency (here and elsewhere) is not dependably informed with good judgement, so that the two hundred or so tragicomic pages on trench warfare are excessive and debilitating, undermining much of the book's potential force.

His most widely read novel, *I, Claudius* (an outstandingly successful BBC television serial and now a videotape), exposes Graves's prose difficulties even further. A brilliantly conceived, researched, and executed first-person historical narrative that reconstructs the life of a shadowy, mentally-retarded, and little-known Roman emperor, *I, Claudius* is told in much the

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same voice as *Good-Bye To All That*, but this time around we can see that the persona of the somewhat spacey, foolish but wise, inept but cunning, anti-hero—who survives much longer than the politically correct know-it-alls—is a fixture of the Gravesian self-image, one that persists to the end of his career. Even as the reader is astonished by the virtuosity involved in keeping this loquacious machine going, he soon begins to wonder whether such stupefying prolixity can just rattle on forever. But the source of this alarm is clear: *there is no sign whatever of an interior life taking place underneath all the clever persiflage.*

Robert Graves, from every indication, had a very busy interior life indeed. But for all his association with the dark, irrational, untamed forces of mythology and antibourgeois romantic/primitive art, his aesthetic had much greater affinity with Augustan comedy (both Roman and English) and classical sensibility. Despite his fulminations against "Apollonian" art, against rationality, and the socially sanctioned "Great Writer" underwritten by the bourgeois polity (of whom Virgil was a hated instance, not to mention Milton, Pope, Yeats, and practically everyone else) and despite his reputation (among some) as "the greatest love poet of the twentieth century," there is a striking absence of sensual or psychological resonance in his work, not just in the prose but in much of the poetry as well. (Neither of the biographers deals with this, nor can I presume to do so here.) Progressing through his writings, one is upset not by deep, troubling undercurrents of primal humanity pulsating through a multivalent diction—but mostly by their absence, and this may account for a certain weightlessness in so much of Graves's output. Although *I, Claudius* is supposed to represent the thoughts that might have been entertained by a Roman of the Empire, in practice Graves does not hesitate to employ anachronisms whenever they suit his purpose. But the big anachronism he avoids is any suggestion of the deeper layers of personality that might have given rise to the utterances of this re-imagined Claudius, whose cunning is only superficially motivated. (This lack of affect is bad enough in *I, Claudius*, but in *Good-Bye To All That* it is passing strange.) Can the White Goddess, after all is said and done, really turn out to be Jonathan Swift in anthropological drag?

As for Graves's celebrated appropriation of Frazer and other

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mythographers—a product of simply staggering industry, like Burton's madcap *Anatomy of Melancholy*—one can only wonder how many people have actually read *The White Goddess* through from cover to cover without reconstructive brain surgery either before or after. In the fifties it was apparently a cult book among aspiring poets at Oxford and Cambridge and to read it through—as an undergraduate *rite de passage*—doubtless functioned in those purlieus in the way that downing twenty cans of beer or swallowing live goldfish function on campuses elsewhere. This egregiously voluble compendium of scholarship-run-amok purports to find a sort of Primal Feminine, a Goddess or Muse, driving an aboriginally matriarchal culture that was subsequently displaced by today's ruling patriarchy, which Graves regards as the source of all our woe. The chief function of a *real* poet (as opposed to Virgil, Milton, and all the rest) is to celebrate the birth, copulation, and death connected with the operation of this female force, poetry's "one subject only." (The poem "To Juan at the Winter Solstice" is a notable airing of the dogma.) But whether Graves himself can be said to have met his own requirements is an open question.

Graves thought of himself chiefly as a poet, not a novelist, and produced a large poetic corpus over a long lifetime. There is no typically Gravesian poem, since the work evolved through varied phases, but a well-known, conveniently brief specimen, "On Portents" (generally understood to be about Laura Riding as goddess), gives some sense of his prosodic bouquet:

> If strange things happen where she is,
> So that men say graves open
> And the dead walk, or that futurity
> Becomes a womb and the unborn are shed,
> Such portents are not to be wondered at,
> Being tourbillions in Time made
> By the strong pulling of her bladed mind
> Through that ever-reluctant element.[4]

As can be seen here, Graves was largely a traditionalist who resisted the esoteric derailments of modernism (though he had

[4] Robert Graves, *Collected Poems* (London, 1975), p. 107.

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plenty of his own esoterica and operated pretty much off the rails). But at the same time, puzzlingly, he claimed not to care about the common reader, whom he thought sufficiently addressed by his money-making novels. His main theme was love, particularly as it related to the cult of the White Goddess, but he rejected the whole "Apollonian" tradition of rational, social, public poets. He alleged he was greatly influenced by the prosody of John Skelton and John Clare, two maverick, antisocial, rough-metered, often satirical sports of English poetry, and he described in a charming little poem called "Flying Crooked" how his own eccentric, stumbling flight was nonetheless closer to the *real* path for poetry (just as Claudius' bumbling idiocies had greater survival value than civic tradition). Yet the "real" path, involving love and myth, rarely produced the powerful effects of, say, large numbers of Yeats's poems with similar provenance. Instead, Graves's poems retain a classical coolness—often bringing to mind the distinctive music of Dryden's nippy sensuousness. It seems everyone admires Graves's craft, as well as a modest number of "successful" poems, but since the sixties the critical response has grown increasingly cautious.

In 1980, Patrick J. Keane complained that Graves avoided penetrating "to the experiential sources of creativity" (a variant of my charge of surface without interior life), and that "there is, after all, no guarantee that an intricately 'crafted' poem will not be trivial." He concluded that Graves is perhaps only a major minor poet.[5] More recently, Robert Richman accused Graves of seeking "protection from a fallen world in the cold arms of an abstract goddess," so that "reading through Graves's poems, one finds oneself aching for a dose of the hated world the poet seeks protection from—even that portion of reality which is no more than 'dirtiness and intrigue and lustfulness.'"[6] But the most comprehensively damaging estimate of Graves's achievement comes from Anthony Burgess:

[5] Patrick J. Keane, *A Wild Civility: Interactions in the Poetry and Thought of Robert Graves* (Columbia, Missouri, 1980). Excerpted in *Modern Critical Views: Robert Graves*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, 1987), p. 151, p. 153.

[6] Robert Richman, "The Poetry of Robert Graves," *The New Criterion*, October 1988, p. 73.

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> For Graves's importance as a poet still seems to be in doubt. He has produced enough to ensure that (as with Wordsworth) at least ten percent of his output has to be taken seriously, but there is not one stanza or even line of his that has become a common quotation among the literary. [To Graves] Pound may have been an impostor, Auden a plagiarist, Eliot a timeserver and Yeats (whom Graves particularly despised) a poseur, but they have all modified our attitude to life and implanted certain ineffaceable rhythms in our brains. Graves does not hug the memory. He seems rhythmically flaccid and has never quite come to terms with the movement of spoken English. His diction has a tendency to obsolete inversion. There are many poems of his which one would not be without. . . . But his extravagant rejection of the entire corpus of modern poetry in English—with the exception of Hardy, Frost, Ransom and, of course, Riding—put him into a position of dangerous eccentricity demanding from his readers a rehabilitation of taste more appropriate to a cultus than to a decent catholicity.[7]

It is a delicious irony in the history of taste that Laura Riding herself now appears headed for contemporary resuscitation, though it may turn out in the end to be little more than another Warholdian fifteen minutes. A recent letter to the *New York Times Book Review* announced that *two* biographies of Riding were currently in the works. And on the icy morning of December 29th, 1990, I roused myself dark and early to attend an 8:30 A.M. special session on Riding at the Modern Language Association's convention in Chicago. The papers—on Riding's place in literary history; on Riding's novel, *A Trojan Ending*; on woman, language, and Riding's renunciation of poetry;[8] and on Riding's essentialism—were stimulating, the audience sizable, the response enthusiastic.

But it is almost inconceivable that Riding's works could ever catch on with more than a small coterie of devoted admirers, literary historians, or doctoral candidates—and not because she is too lightweight to warrant serious attention. Rather the reverse: she was caught in the grip of a cosmic consciousness too Platonic and (however contradictorily) Heideggerian, too weightily truth-seeking and essentialist to allow her to function gracefully in the world of appearances in which all the arts

[7] Anthony Burgess, "The Magus of Mallorca," in *Modern Critical Views*, 172.

[8] I am grateful to Susan Beth Koenig for sending me a copy of the paper she delivered on this subject.

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(except music) have their being and nourishment. Abandoning the sensuousness, the figurativeness, the visual imagery of poetic language, as well as rhyme and meter; eschewing the multivocity and play of meaning that are inescapably bound to language—she tried to purify words of their connotations so they would be the direct emanations of cosmic soulhood. Achieving this, poetry would be the vehicle—the only vehicle—of truth-telling. Indeed, she tried to purge herself of everything idiosyncratically concrete so that her *own* self would also be a universal, spiritualized substance—in a word, "Finality." (In both attempts she failed, and after her marriage to Schuyler Jackson she came to acknowledge that she too was a sexualized being wrought from the common dust.) Many of her poems explicitly dealt with language and its relation to truth and "being." Her own language, flayed and disembowelled of anything considered bogus or inessential, became increasingly austere, spare, and incomprehensible. At its *most* accessible (with a few concessions to traditional poetics), it could sound like this:

> This is not exactly what I mean
> Any more than the sun is the sun.
> But how to mean more closely
> While the sun shines so approximately?
> What a world of awkwardness!
> What hostile implements of sense!
> Perhaps this is as close a meaning
> As perhaps becomes such knowing.
> Else I think the world and I
> Must live together as strangers and die—
> A sour love, each uncertain whether
> Was ever a thing to love the other.
> No, better for both to be nearly sure
> Each of each—exactly where
> Exactly I and exactly the world
> Fail to meet by a moment, and a word.[9]

[9] "The World and I," from *The Poems of Laura Riding: A New Edition of the 1938 Collection* (New York, 1980), p. 187.

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"Even before 1930" writes her chief commentator, Joyce Wexler, "Riding had tried to capture the universal rather than the particular in her poetry. Read chronologically, her work demonstrates the process of continually subtracting the personal elements of ordinary life from her vision of spiritual reality. After eliminating the variety of nature and the diversity of subjective sensory perception, she arrived at zero."[10] Indeed, she eventually gave up poetry altogether and embarked with Jackson on the futile enterprise of producing a dictionary of the essential meanings of words, a plan barely comprehensible in our post-Saussurean, post-Derridean age. Explaining her renunciation of poetry, she wrote: "I came close to achieving, in my poems, trueness of intonation and direct presence of mind in word. But, what I achieved in this direction was ever sucked into the whorl of poetic artifice," an artifice she could never tolerate and which had contributed to her growing contempt for Robert Graves by the early 1930's.[11] The logic of her lifelong quest implied a progression toward silence, a movement that eventually put a period to her career as an artist. Yet even today, as an opinionated voice of literary history, she is talking still.

After the MLA session's panelists had finished their highly engaged considerations of Riding as modernist or postmodernist, of the lasting effects of her attempted suicide, of her own special brand of feminism, of her distinctive views of language, we heard from a respondent who may very well be one of Riding's putative biographers.[12] Having been in touch with her for a number of years, she was able to inform us that the indomitable Mrs. (Riding) Jackson had actually read all of the papers; and though her comments to their authors seemed gracious and cordial, one had the sense nevertheless that she mostly found them hopelessly academic—and quite, quite wrong.

[10] Joyce Piell Wexler, *Laura Riding's Pursuit of Truth* (Athens, Ohio, 1979), p. 80.
[11] Quoted in Wexler, p. 145.
[12] I received a copy of this response from its author, Elizabeth Friedmann, whom I would like to thank.

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MARK JARMAN

Iris

> It is easy to know the beauty of inhuman things, sea, storm and mountain; it is their soul and their meaning.
> Humanity has its lesser beauty, impure and painful; we have to harden our hearts to bear it.
>
> I have hardened my heart only a little . . .
> —Robinson Jeffers, "The World's Wonders"

The woman sat on the bus, her daughter's head in her lap,
and read a paperback of poems,
The only book from college that she'd saved, Robinson
Jeffers, and talked back to him,
As always. He was her poet. The bus crossed the two lakes,
and the land between them,
Like stages of warning. Glare of water, shadow of close
dense trees, glare again.
Then entry into the isolated flatland that she'd left, married,
pregnant, unhurt,
Not yet in thrall to this dead stranger from California, who
spoke of an end to the continent
She had to imagine, had to summon up even more
strenuously while coming back
To western Kentucky, a mother, estranged, abused and
wounded, hiding a black eye behind dark glasses.
Her daughter curled her legs on the hard vinyl seat. She
sucked her thumb and sighed for the trip to end.
The windbreak oaks dangled their pea-green April flowers;
a field flashed a green facet of winter wheat.
Iris read about granite and spray and poppies and said to
her poet, "What is a ground-swell?
Why do you envy hardness? My mama has gotten hard. Oh,
what will she say when she sees us?"

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When Iris came home, she saw the Chevy truck, with
camper top, and Hoy and Rice, her brothers,
Standing back to smell its newness, like part of the spring
air. Fat Hoy like a friar,
His black hair shining like a wallet with greaseless hair oil.
His twin, Rice, like the after-picture
From the diet ads, thin as a hoe handle, his hair, too, slick
with the same stuff.
Their dachshund Crank, with L-shaped broken tail like a
tire iron, looked up at them,
As if they were big dogs in charge of frolicking, and waited
for the fun to start.
Iris and Ruth had hitched a ride from the Dairy Queen,
across from the bus stop, and the ice cream
Ruth had eaten still haloed her mouth. Uncle Hoy grabbed
her and kissed it away.
And Rice, full of joy for his truck, took the cases out of his
sister's hands, and took Iris into his arms.
She let him feel the skinny ribs and remove the sunglasses to
see the nicotine stain
Of the healing black-eye, only part of the settlement from
Cale. "Oh, Rice," she said, surprised
At her own joy in saying it, "we've had some real bad times."
The dog Crank barked and frisked.
And there was the sound of Ruthie squealing as Hoy burred
her neck with his fleshy lips.

Around them, ploughed fields, windbreak trees, the
bisecting road where, when traffic passed,
It was only a single truck with its rising and falling wind. Set
on its dirt apron,
The mobile home almost looked permanent, brushed by the
branch tips of two hedgeapple trees,
Male and female. Old trees to match, in Iris's mind, her
poet's redwoods. Their flesh
Orange in the ruts of the bark, and the bark, soaked with
spring rain, green near the root.
The corn would go in, the soybeans, and the tobacco. All of
this was in the offing. Surely, these were labors
Her poet could approve of. High up the hedgeapples wore
stiff thorns only birds and squirrels

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Could pick among safely. She longed to climb up there, for
the hawk's view, the lofty gaze as if down on furrows of
white surf.
Soon the sea around them would be the seasonal green, the
dense eradication of space by flourishing growth.
"Nobody told me you was coming home," said Mama. The
woman did a funny dance of ire or nervousness
Beside the steps, wandering in a tight circle, as if to wind
herself up.
"I didn't tell nobody, Mama," Iris said. "I've got Ruthie
here." Mama picked the child up
As if the mother had left her for an overnight. "Give your
old grandma a kiss, then."
And offered her puffy cheek and grinned, the once
beautiful smile now cracked and discolored.
Only a drunk's blurred vision could restore it. "Where's
Cale, then?" Mama said.
She wouldn't look at Iris or at Ruth, though the child
straddled her hip
And kneaded the smeared tattoo on her flabby upper arm
and studied the smallpox dent.
"It was them drugs, wasn't it?" And Iris looked away, too.
Hoy and Rice
Had boarded their new truck, full of seed bags, and would
drive it out to the field's far edge.
"Drugs and that old woman, Mama. You know," Iris said,
and again that odd joy
Seized her. "Poor Cale needed a Mama just like me. She
gave him money, too."
"You know what your brothers is doing, don't you?" Mama
put Ruthie down, gently, and the child
With nothing to occupy her stood between the two grown-
ups and sucked her thumb.
Mama pointed out at the far edge, the windbreak there,
where the truck's chrome sparked with reflected sun.
"Gonna plant us a nice cash crop of marijuana out there in
the drainage ditches." Then, piously,
"Did it last year. Worked real well. But I don't want to see it
in my house, you hear?
It's not like beer you know will get you hammered and make
you pay next morning. It's the money.

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We got to have the money. I don't want that Cale to know."
Iris wept it—"Mama!"
And Ruthie gasped. Iris said, "He's not talked to me since
he beat me up. He's with that woman
Down Chattanooga way." "Don't want it nowhere but out in
that field," Mama said.
"In the drainage ditches near them red oaks. Don't want to
see it. Don't want to know until we got the money."

Iris picked up the bags and one of his lines rose to mind
with the simple motion of lifting them—
How her poet's place above the ocean like all beautiful
places called for a sad story, a terrible
Event. That sounded to her like a wish no sane person
would wish. She remembered his image
Of the roof below trees and a cornfield and a woman
beating a horse, her son tying a chain to the horse's
tongue.
You cannot live like that, she said to herself, and lugged the
cases up the metal stairs,
Calling Ruth as if it were she in a reverie, stopped and
letting the world spin along.
Mama was making noise in the kitchen. Ruth held the dog;
he licked the remaining sweetness off
Her face. The brief span of pleasure, a balm in the air,
before summer's green
Thickened and turned feverish and the great globes of
useless fruit appeared in the hedgeapple and drummed
On the roof—a respite, but was it like the beaten horse's or
like the woman's whose arm grew tired of punishment?

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"This is Hoy's favorite," Mama said and poured macaroni
shells into a pan at a rolling boil.
Its heat filled the kitchenette and dinette, the hamburger
turned gray in the frying pan.
Ruth, thumb in mouth, stroking the dog, sat in the maroon
overstuffed chair
Before the TV, the monster set that dwarfed the living area,
shrunk further

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By the cot for her bed and the suitcases open by the couch
where Iris would sleep. All windows open,
All curtains passing breezes back and forth, the A/C unit,
big as the TV,
Crouched silent in its window, waiting for summer, Hoy and
Rice on the metal stairs
With beers and cigarettes. "I'll just pour this fat off, Mama,"
Iris said. "No!"
Mama grabbed the handle. "No," she said. "Hoy wants that
on the noodles, instead of butter.
Rice likes it, too. I don't mind it myself. Get you that garlic
salt and pepper there."
Meat and shells. And green beans from the can. Peaches
from the can in their juice. Glasses of milk
For Hoy and Rice and Ruth, instant iced tea for Iris and
Mama. "Didn't you set
That table, then?" Mama asked. "Teach that little girl to set
this table. You'll both need
To do your chores." At dinner, Ruth asked Iris to pick the
meat out of her shells,
The glistening mess of pieces of broken macaroni, wilted
with overcooking, some few keeping
Their shapes to confirm that this was Hoy's favorite—
doughy shells, lips closed, all greased with sweet fat.
They sat, the five of them, at the oblong formica table, with
its ridged chrome sides,
In padded plastic upholstered chairs on springy chrome legs
turned in U's and S's.
All windows open, the light burning low behind the black
hedge of red oaks.
Among the still naked branches of the hedgeapples, Iris
pictured the stars,
The exiting winter constellations appearing face down
toward the west, led by Orion
Into that low dull redness over the mobile home's aluminum
roof.
Then the breeze, sipping in through the window by the
table, took on a chill, making a shiver pass
Like a static electric shock through each of them, almost

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making them smile—Hoy, Rice, Iris.
Mama stood and, going window to window, struggled with
the flimsy metal frames and forced each shut.

Iris undressed in the bathroom, among its gold flecks on
white, like scrambled eggs, noticing
The galaxy of coal-black mildew across the shower's glass
door, the cup of toothbrushes that,
When she knocked it over, showed a gummy residue that
smelled rank. She washed it out.
Standing erect, she looked at herself, caught naked in the
dingy glare. A boy with tits,
She recalled Cale laughing once, laughing because that must
have been what he liked.
Having a baby had spread her hips a little, softened her
belly slung above her pelvis,
And her small breasts hung, no longer alert and pointed,
their nipples soft, oblong, indented.
She turned her right side to the mirror to check the bruise
mapping upward from
Buttock to ribs, charting Cale's last kick. Hardly the heroine
for you, she said to her poet.

It was the close community of sleepers Iris had come home
for. Now she listened to them.
Hoy and Rice in their room off the hall sighed and farted as
they fell asleep. In the master bedroom,
That balanced the metal rectangle, end of the hall, Mama
murmured a man's name—her dead husband's?—
Woke herself, whispered, soon slept again, muttering
something else.
Ruth lay like a four-limbed starfish on her camp cot,
nightgown hiked up to her navel, unguarded.
Iris tucked her in. The dog Crank, tapping with unclipped
nails across the kitchen linoleum,
Slurped water from his dish, sleepwalked back to Hoy and
Rice. Soon Iris, too,
Would be part of this, as she needed to be. The lamp, set on
a TV tray, she turned on dim
And took the paperback from her purse, the book already

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beginning to be worn from reading.
She looked at the poet's face on the cover, the charcoal
angles, the facets of a stone hawk,
A carved head with living mouth. She noticed the fleshlike
curve of the mouth compared
To other lines that met at points and formed hard ridges.
And opened the book at random. And read that
humanity
Was the mould to break from. And, as with each time she
read this declaration, did not understand.
She saw the young professor who had taught the book,
standing at his office window,
Seven floors up above the rounded tops of trees, and
looking out, as she sat by his desk,
As if he had a view of the sea. One shoulder propped
against the window frame, he described
The swirling yet distinct events of nature, all that he saw
missing from this place.
He knew a bay where, if this were the ocean, they would see
pelicans stop in midair
And fall like guided missiles at fish below the surface, gulls
quarrel over eels
Or crab legs dangling from their beaks. Everywhere the eye
went—motion, drama. Not this inertia.
He pushed off from the window, shrugged. Nothing going
on. And Iris thought,
"He doesn't know my family." And all that malarky about
the continent's edge, the stage
Where gods toiled inhumanly, noble gulls climbed shafts of
sunlight, as if they didn't scavenge garbage.
She'd seen them on the lakes—yes, even this far from the
sea, here where nothing happened—gobbling fish guts.
But she recognized the story of the drunk whose red horse
trampled him to death.
She recognized the woman with the child, putting up with
him, outlasting him.
She hadn't hated Cale, as Jeffers' woman hated her man.
When Ruth was born,
Cale went sailing. He said it was too much, the c-section, the
waiting. He didn't see their baby

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Till she was two days old. Then, stood at the bed's foot, as
Iris nursed her, and rocked and rocked,
Hugging himself and rubbing his nose and saying it was
damn cold in this damn room.
He wouldn't touch the baby, wouldn't touch Iris, and never
came home from work some nights. One night
Iris had gone to bed after calling and calling his place of
business (that sign-painter's shop he tried).
She woke past midnight, heard the baby crying and stopped
herself. "That's not the baby."
She reached for Cale. He wasn't there. "That's some old cat
outside." But Iris couldn't move.
It wasn't the baby or a cat. To move was to dredge herself
up from a nightmare depth.
The crying was a growling and a groaning from the baby's
room. She walked in
And flicked the light on to make the monster vanish in the
glare, before she faced it.
There he was, curled in Ruth's crib beside her, the baby fast
asleep in his body's curve.
He was naked and asleep and crying. And Iris said, "Why,
bless your heart." She'd wanted him right then.
But now, she wanted sleep and read for sleep, the motion
into sleep—like going west
And rising straight through mountains to descend on a
sloping plain to something shining
Where the stone dwelling waited with her poet, and each
animal he loved—hawk, horse, gull,
Sea lion—let him out of his accursed human body and
would let her in.
Now, she was her poet (this was part of the sleepward
dream) and she would love what he despised.
And have both worlds—the wild and human, the great and
petty, a family. But as she crossed
Her hands between her breasts for sleep, left cheek turned
to take sleep's other blow,
She knew she wanted nothing so grand as sea cliffs or the
wingstroke of a sea gull.
She wanted touch that would be given and received with
gratitude, the gift and grace of sanity.

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If Iris needed touch, then so did Mama, and she had missed
it longer, though she had men friends
To drink with at the state line roadhouses, old boys on the
scout for something a little less ripe.
Then, Mama found Charles. Iris believed luck like Mama's
had to come from God.
Everybody knew Charles; he was the crossing guard at
Kroger's; what you'd call a good boy.
Two crosswalks rayed into the parking lot outside the store;
there, Charles directed traffic.
Stopping the flow when a retired farmer, not looking,
shuffled across; sometimes,
Pausing to assist an addled old shopper who had lost her
place. He blocked the traffic
With a gesture or waved cars through, his lips compressed,
head bowed as if to signal how much
He understood the world's frustrations, the old's especially.
They stood with laden carts,
Facing the labyrinth and had, sometimes, parents
themselves, lingering at home. They held up traffic
And couldn't help it. Charles understood. He wore a
uniform but always held his cap
As if he paid respects to all, his red face friendly, a sucker in
his mouth,
Like a white thermometer. Even-tempered, slow, yet finally,
capricious. Leaning
Down to hear a crony's story on a hot slow afternoon, he
would wave cars through,
And, instead of walking to escort her, signal a woman with
her cart to cross.
The day that Mama found him he was like that, lackadaisical
as a nodding thistle.
A bad bearing on her cart made one wheel spin. Mama had
bought too much and tried to guide
The cart with her beer belly. Charles, ignoring her,
motioned a car through. There was a wiry, soft
Collision. Mama's cart tipped sideways. Groceries sprayed
across the asphalt. Charles cursed.
Mama grabbed his forearm like a wader caught by a current
on shifting stones.
When somebody appeared—the manager?—he whirled on

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Charles and Mama both and shouted.
He grabbed Charles's hat and said he would replace the groceries and Charles, too.
So, Charles had needed someone, just like Mama. Truck loaded, the poor boy stunned, Mama drove
To the state line and bought them both a beer or two, a few games of video poker.
Charles cheered up. You couldn't tell how old he was, like those boys on Lawrence Welk
Who dance at show's end with the grandmothers, smiling more tenderly than any son.
Unembarrassed, helpful, but a little puzzled, too, to be getting drunk like this
With a woman Mama's age. The groceries should not have sat out in the truck so long.
Lost a gallon of ice cream, Hoy's favorite kind, and when Rice saw it melted on the cab floor,
He screamed bloody murder. But Charles and Mama, happy on their high of new love
And beer, appeased him. Gracefully, as when he guided traffic on a good and busy day,
Charles cleaned the melted ice cream, head and shoulders in the cab, butt wobbling—
Hard work on a warm day—as they watched. Hard not to forgive such good will, and they did.

Charles worked the truck patch on the mobile home's south side, all spring choosing among the new pale shoots
Which to uproot, and joined Mama in bed, ending her predawn muttering, bringing her home
From the state line drunk, unpredictable, but soothable. Iris read that earnestness
In going about one's business, earnestness like nature's—the rising green stockade of corn,
The heart-shaped bean leaves pairing up and hiding the crusted earth—excelled the virtue of art.
Her poet said, "All the arts." At night, Ruth asleep beside her Uncle Hoy or Rice,
And they admonished to tuck her in when they turned off the TV and went to bed,

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And Mama and Charles still drinking at the state line, not due till after midnight, Iris took
The second car, a bare-bones Ford Fairlane, unsteady on its shocks as the baby in the treetop,
And drove to the university library and there sat late with magazines and students
In the good light that, with night spread against the windows, made her reading earnest,
Almost an act of nature. Once, she saw the English teacher who had given her
Her poet. She watched him move along the magazine racks, taking down
Fat quarterlies and pamphlets and newspapers, and set them, from A to Z, in a stack, and flip through them,
His shoulders squared like a yoke, the light quivering on his glasses. She remembered it,
That look on his face, and knew if she approached him, he would keep it for a moment, then—an effort—
Penetrate the coldness with a smile of attention, or at least a listening regard.
She spoke to him. She waited for his recognition. But saw, even as she reminded him of her poet—their poet—
He was waiting for the interview to end, did not remember her, or, if he did,
Did not care. She had taken her seat again and looked at the yellowish tableau against the windows,
Her former teacher bent between two stacks of magazines, and Iris seated far to his left,
Almost out of the picture, thinking—"I still have Robinson Jeffers, you sorry son of a bitch."

She still had her ghost husband, Cale, waking her at dawn, rapping at the kitchen window,
Hungry for his fix. He thumped his arm and opened his beak and begged.
When Iris woke, she saw the titmouse with a sunflower seed clamped between claws,
Pecking the black shell, shaking the window glass where she had hung the feeder by suction cups.
It was August. Green Indians, eight feet tall, had taken over

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the palisades of corn.
The hedgeapples gave daylight by the house a tint of undersea tranquillity.
The female's cloudy womb of leaves bore pulpy, useless fruit. When thunderstorms passed over,
Making the two trees claw the roof, the apples, big as softballs, boomed on the metal, rolled off
And rolled below the house or into ruts and ditches, to turn pale yellow, brown, and soften,
Or be pecked apart. She could not look at them without thinking of Cale. But then,
The two trees lunging in the wind, producing this strange fruit, turned her mind to Ruth . . .
She knew it would be hot. Out in the drainage ditches, far from the road, the marijuana
Flowered like the ghost of the Kentucky hemp fields, weeds blossoming pure cash.
She could open windows to the brief dew of morning or let the house hoard what coolness it kept.
The air conditioner had shut off. She lay and thought of it. How Hoy and Rice would lurch
Into the house and bellow with pleasure at its chill. How Mama basked before the roaring unit,
Reading her tabloid. How Iris and Ruth, as if snowbound, thought up games. Charles was handy,
If it was broken. The titmouse hammered the seed, the hedgeapples offered their tremendous shade.
Coffee time. She sat up, sinking in the breathless pillow of the couch, and waited.
She felt along each thigh—thin—and pulled herself out of the soft pit with a grunt.
She found her slippers, reached for robe. Cereal for Ruth, a bowl that would swell to mush
Under her neglect. Toast later for them both. Eggs and ham for Hoy and Rice.
No worry about Charles and Mama. For them, hair of the dog, cold beer in the ice box.
They'd be up for lunch. The coffee dripped, accumulating, black. She knocked butts
From the TV ashtray on its stand, focus of the ashy sour

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smell of morning in the house,
Until the coffee covered with its fragrance. This was home
despite all. The pot hushed,
Signaled with a puff of steam, a few last drips. The first best
cup was hers.
Ruth, half asleep, would stumble to the table. She set the
cereal there and turned
To watch her birds. Low on seed. A titmouse, finding
nothing, looked her in the eye.
Beyond this smooth reflective plane that showed it only
another titmouse, it could detect
Another world with answers for this deprivation. This was
not the nature her poet
Loved—unless it was the broken-winged hawk's request for
death that he recorded.
Sometimes she thought her thoughts could take her out of
the world and she'd be happy. That was transcendence,
Wasn't it? Her teacher might have told her what it was. The
wild window-eye
Showed her the ferocity of hunger, and, once again, Cale's
face flared in hers.
She heard her brothers waking, stretching, yawning. Ruth,
who always woke up giggling, snorted
At a dream joke, and let her eyes open like coin slots,
humorless with sleep.
Nothing but snoring from Mama and Charles, both in the
master suite. They would wake dry-mouthed,
Half-brained, dazed as mockingbirds who fly at their own
reflections in plate glass,
Worthless until that first beer, then hardly worth much after
that. All her stolen time
Was time that no one knew she stole. Iris held her coffee to
her lips. The family stirred.
She thought of her poet's house, built of ocean boulders, on
the tongue of lava and granite
By a river mouth to the Pacific. Gulls danced there, as he
said they did. The moon,
Waning and wild by day, matched their whiteness.
Something—a tree called the dark-leaved Australian—
And the cypress gave shadow. Unimaginable, except as the

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fantastic or childlike shapes a word breeds
As images. This place, her home, was full within her, too.
Rising on the thrill
Of morning coffee, her mind laid down the mottled
snakeskin of the road through fields, the hot
Smell of pines, the rise where on its clay-pale crest their
place was mounted on cinder blocks,
Silvery and dew-bearded. The towering corn behind it. The
double hedgeapples like a wave
Held to shield and not assault, brushing the aluminum roof.
Look for these, she would say,
Like her poet, when we've hooked the house to a semi and
the septic tank's caved in and the power lines are down
And the fields gone back to hemp. Look for the glossy green
throwers of shadow and pulpy meteors.
On this spot a woman harrowed by failure found refuge
enough with her kin.
Her ghost fills a vial of air for birds, still breeding, riding
the limber tips of the hedgeapple trees.

*

Hoy was the fat version of Rice and Rice the skinny one of
Hoy. Both reeked of Marlboros.
They wore sportshirts with pockets for their packs. They
loved each other and did small favors
Constantly, like loaning cigarettes, sharing beer. They slept
in single beds
In one room, bachelors too young yet to seem spinsterish.
They had separate lives.
Hoy's was a life of endomorphic pleasures; his stations of
the cross were fried pie at the courthouse cafe,
Ice cream at the DQ, and various forms of fish, flesh, and
fowl at fast food restaurants.
Rice liked business; slim and smart, he made deals, for the
new truck, the rented land and trailer, the marijuana
crop.
They'd sit below a red oak, sweating, drinking cans of Slice.
"Gimme one of them,"
Hoy'd say and nod at his brother's pocket. "Now, gimme a
light." Rice would and drawl,

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"You want me to kick you in the chest and get you started,
too?" Those boys. Iris and Ruth
Would sit with them at lunchtime. Iris egged them on to
hear them talk. "Which of you remembers
Daddy best?" she'd ask. "Well, I'm a minute older," Rice
would claim. "So, I believe
I hold the man in mind a minute more than brother here.
He was a slim old man."
Hoy grinned and said as meanly as he could, "I'd call him
heavyset." Rice had a way
Of shrugging, like a Frenchman, that implied, "Believe what
you have never seen, my friend.
But my eyes know." Iris knew that they were lucky; older
than she, still confident.
They thought a pit bull trained to guard the marijuana
plants might draw some interest.
They kept, instead, the little dachshund, Crank. He was
their good luck charm, their pet and mascot.
And he was lucky, substandard and a roamer, returning
after a month abroad with a bruise
Black as a telephone on his pink belly, his wiry golden fur
all over burrs,
Ticks swollen in his ears. Given up for lost and then come
back. Or when he ate
A meal of tossed-out chicken bones from the garbage, his
stomach turned to cast iron, cobbled with points and
nubs,
The skin, to the touch, like the surface of a knurled ladder
step. Yet every bone passed—
A softened, bloody stick. A sweet dog weakening its long
spine, sitting up to beg,
Hopping steps into the truck. His trick was burying cigarette
butts. The brothers flicked them
Under the red oak where they sat at lunchtime. Crank's long
claws found the softer mulch.
Now, they sat, Iris and Ruth on the cloth spread under the
red oak, the shade warm,
The sunshine hot. Hoy and Rice in the corn, weeding their
secret crop. Charles and Mama
Had taken the truck to town to buy bailing wire. But they

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would come back drunk, with or without.
Ruth followed Crank along the row of red oaks, like
columns, the windbreak that,
One winter, Iris had seen housing two dozen red tails on the
leeward side. Walking,
She'd stopped, struck, to see a string of lampshades, the
hawks' white bellies, along the oaks,
Facing the hacked and empty square of acreage. A day
almost too cold to walk in,
Except if you were 19, an expectant mother pressed to make
a big decision.
And she had decided. Two dozen red tails. Her poet never
saw so many hawks at once.
Ruth called her mother, "Mama, there's two doggies here.
They're drunk like Charles and Grandma!"
"Drunk doggies, Ruth?" Then, Crank ran out in a circle,
belly low. Ruth pointed
And stood aside as two fox pups, not much bigger than gray
squirrels, staggered near her,
Butted a tree with pointed snouts. Crank made a sound of
pain and Ruth called to him,
"Look, Cranky, doggies! But they're drunk." Iris saw the
fresh foam on their lips, and one,
Lunging into the other, bit its flank. Both foxes had fresh
and crusted wounds. One lurched
Against the red oak, bit the bark. Iris grabbed Ruth up.
Crank dashed between
The foxes, swirling and snapping. Iris called for Hoy and
Rice. Fat, puffing Hoy ran out,
His hoe a funny, useless looking weapon in his fists. "Oh,
Crank's been bit by these foxes,"
Iris said, clutching Ruth, as the dogs fought and snarled.
Dizzy with their rabies,
The foxes bumped together and slipped into the corn.
Crank barked and chased in after them,
Bitten on both ears and on the haunch. "Don't go in there,"
Hoy shouted, following, flailing
With his hoe blade. He found the foxes and destroyed them.
Out sauntered Crank, wounded, proud,
And—Iris saw it—doomed. Rice, farther off than Hoy,

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walked out with his three-pronged weeder.
"Some mad foxes have bit our dog," Hoy told him. "Hasn't
he got his shots, then?" Rice replied.
"Iris?" There was Crank, the bleeding survivor, roamer,
lucky charm, without a history.
"You tell me, brothers. I have no idea." She held Ruth tight
who leaned to touch her dog.
They all stood off and flinched as Crank ran up to one, then
the other, hardly hurt, perky,
A loaded gun. "Well, we could wait and see," said Hoy.
They looked at Iris, at the child.
Iris gave Ruth a tighter squeeze. Rice said, "Crank, come
here, boy." The dog limped after him,
Into the towering corn, to the far side of the field, out of
earshot almost.

That night, dinner over, Charles and Mama not back, Hoy
and Rice and Ruth, like numb surviving family
Before the television, Iris told herself she'd take the old
Ford into town.
She would sit in the sad and mellow library light, beside the
magazine stacks, opposite the windows,
And think of the sentimental poem her poet wrote about his
English bulldog, buried
Outside the living room window. Sit and wait to see her old
professor, still a self-absorbed
Young man, cross the plane of night-reflective glass, and
come to her and whisper an apology.
She knew she shouldn't do it, but, seeing her asleep, she
scooped up Ruth and carried her back
To Mama's room. She asked her brothers to put her on the
couch before they went to bed
Or soon as they heard Mama coming home. Their eddies of
TV-colored smoke
Circled them. Each clutched a beer and nodded goodbye.
They'd take care of Ruth. The child woke, demanding
A stack of books to look at. Soon, Iris knew, she would slide
down the propped up pillow,
The open books piled up like leaves on the babe in the
woods, the harsh overhead light, making

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The room a plain box, without charm, shadowless, except
for the forest of stuff on Mama's bureau.
"Be sure you move her soon as you hear Mama," Iris said,
knowing if Mama came home
Drunk she'd want her bed and might wake the child roughly
and lug her to the couch. Sober,
Mama and Charles would sit with her boys around the TV
hearth, smoke a few more, have a cold one.
Iris looked back at Ruth propped up in Mama's bed,
reading her picture books aloud.
She could recite the simple captions as she turned the pages,
pushing her hair back.
"It needs a trim," thought Iris to herself. She turned to Hoy
and Rice in the dim room,
Watching the wide complacent screen change colors, the
characters pause, washed with canned laughter.
Neither of them laughed. They said, "Good night, Iris."
And Hoy, "We'll watch the little one."
When Iris opened the door Mama had the handle and
swung back, rocked on her heels,
And threw her arm back to Charles, slugging him with her
big pocketbook. Iris caught
The hand that let the door go and, with Charles, she held
her mother steady. Charles's career
Of guiding old unsteady ladies among cars helped him keep
his balance, the liquor
Luminous in his friendly face. But Mama's drinking went to
the base of her brain and stewed there,
Snapping like a live wire loose in a rain puddle. It rattled
and threw her off.
"Goddamn you going out this door!" she said and pulled
herself with Iris's help up.
She stumbled in and did a clumsy pivoting dance of nerves,
catching a glimpse
Of Ruth down the hall in her own bed. "I ain't got a bed
tonight, I see.
No, I'm the one's got to shack up on the davenport. Whyn't
that Cale come and take you both home?"
She opened the refrigerator, grabbed a beer, and popped it.
A jet of froth flicked

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Across her face and in one eye. She squinted, "No, you're
going to the library."
Charles had taken a seat with Hoy and Rice and laughed at
something on the TV. They looked
Solemnly at him. "Mama, I have not got time to bicker," Iris
said. "I told
The boys to move her when you came home. Now, I'll do
it." The rocking, bitter woman looked
At the linoleum, beer like a baby on her hip. She asked for a
cigarette.
Her sons, encircled by the flattening rings of their own
smoke, did not move. Charles rummaged
The pack from his shirt. The yellow kitchen light stood
around the drunk woman, the box
Of the TV's haze around the men, the glare around the
mother and her child.
"I'm putting Ruth in your bed, Hoy, OK?" said Iris. "You
bet," Hoy answered, glancing,
A sly son, at his mama. "I'm putting you in Uncle Hoy's bed
until you fall asleep,"
Iris told her daughter. "I'll kiss you when I come home."
Ruth rode her mother's hip, a book
Under her arm, thumb in mouth, half asleep already. The
angry yellow woman
Said, "I'm going to bed, then." Her manfriend heard and
followed, telling everyone a courteous good night.

*

Iris tried to imagine the life her poet would write for her,
but the one place he described—
Bare hills, meager grasses, rock like pointed fire that she
could hardly picture, sea
Underscoring it all with mud-gray body and snarling teeth—
that place was too noble.
She withdrew from there and reentered the corn and
soybean squares, the windbreak oaks,
A few upsloping features of terrain, downsloping into
hollows where creeks cut
Under tree roots. She'd have to make this landscape do,
even passing through it now

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In darkness as she drove. She'd have to make her own life
immanent in the mind she imagined
For him. All this could be deliberate and instantaneous. She
would show him that.
If he could choose his death bed by a window, showing him
the ocean, see the thing
Each day, then, she could make a legend of her life. She
pounded the steering wheel and wept,
Held tight and slowed to take the curve of bottomland—
headlights flooding across a field
Of purplish, fleshy, drumstick heads of milo. Beyond, an
opaque boundary of trees.
What she saw was not herself, a stark figure with a mask for
face,
Like one of his women. What she saw were small brown
frogs, like pebbles come to life, in a creek bed.
Above her shoulder, exposed tree roots and the charcoal
band of topsoil; beside her, Ruth stooping
To pee and holding in each fist a creek frog; ahead, Rice
and Hoy sloshing in old shoes
Through the quick shallows, snapping fishing lines into
channels. Now, she remembered.
It was an earlier memory of summer, and when she
rounded the next bend, stopping to catch
A frog for Ruth, who saw them everywhere and couldn't
make up her mind—a thousand pets!—
Iris knew she would find Charles and Mama underneath a
laden persimmon tree,
Weighing a branch of fruit in their hands, Mama saying,
"They won't be sweet for months."
An idyll; an idle thought; an ideal. She shook herself to see
the event for real. Daydreaming.
But that had been a day and not a dream, and then she saw
Rice point at small footprints
Beside a pothole in the creek. Ruthie watched his finger
indicate the patterns
Of mink, raccoon, deer, fox, and—Look, he'd said—coyote
coming back. Clean prints in mud,
From, Rice said, the previous night when they'd come down
to drink. Iris saw town lights up ahead.

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The emptiness around them gave them too much
significance. She passed the courthouse.
The spotlight on its painted clockfaces showed hands always
at noon. The border state
Confederate memorial faced northeast. Foam of detergent
in the bank fountain—
College pranksters. The university parking lot, the
horizontals of the new library.
The bars of light there. She parked the car. And felt, with
her coming to a stop, the stillness of the heat
Push close again. It wasn't that her life could not be lived
here. It was being lived here.
And she was living it. This was her life. But she couldn't
believe her poet understood it.

That woman you have heard of who returned with her girlchild, to
the family mobile home,
Parked on a hump of clay beside a forty-acre square, entering the
daily rhythm
Of that near fatal family—I have been watching her. She knows the
drunken mother
Is harmless, yet has so declined into her love affair—the red-faced
boy whose hands
Still smooth with youth pass over her lined features in the dark—the
daughter must be careful.
The brothers play a dangerous game, yet she winks at it, takes the
child out to the illegal crop.
Already, losing the little dog should be an omen. The crop, cut and
hung to dry
In the old tobacco shed, hidden behind persimmons near the creek,
waits for its buyer.
My eyes are all I have. Lidless, tearless, less expressive than a stroke
victim's,
They are two dry unflinching points of observation. They see her
now, in the library.
All along the lit oblong of glass the hard-shelled and dusty summer
insects
Collide and flail themselves to death. There are boundaries we
cannot cross. She reads.
Her stillness as she reads, turning the magazine's pages with a

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clockhand's slowness, is meant
As a reproach. So, there is no drama in my life, the action says.
Then, I'll be still.
Long suffering will start to crease her face in ten years, working its
way out from the eyes.
Instead of waxing fat, the buffer aging bodies need for life, her body
will wane,
Frost-hard as a January moon. Predictions. Omens. Prophecies.
All to pass the time. She reads. The drama's there inside the head of
loose curled hair. Or there,
Inside the mobile home, where her brothers doze before the television.
The daughter
Sleeps, thumb in mouth, among her books. The grandmother pillows
an aging boy's head
On her breasts. You cannot put off living until ready. Life is always
urgent, here
And now. It fires at you point blank. And here's a young man
stopping near her seat. Are they
The only people here tonight? That's loneliness—a library on a
summer night.
He takes a seat beside her. She puts down her magazine. Now they
are in profile.
What do I read in this tableau? Solemnity, then laughter. Then,
agreement. Now,
Out of the glass doors they both come, not yet making deliberate
contact, but close despite the heat.
The scintillant eruption of their voices, new to each other's
happiness. Shrill crickets climaxing.
And my eyes rushing back among the stars.

We wait beyond the newly intimate strangeness for the first
confiding statement,
The retrospective comment or confession—what we thought
before we loved or made love.
Iris and her professor—Tom—found the August night too
hot to walk in long,
Like a green pond out in someone's yard that turns
lukewarm in summer, no more refreshing
Than drinking sea water to quench thirst. He lived above a
grocery store, among

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Smells of its lunch counter, barbecuing, smoked ham—quiet
after nine but fragrant still.
He flipped the air conditioner on, the sea roar of the
summer, and they took seats
At his dinner table, white and heavy as porcelain with coats
of white enamel.
Iris thought, "Life's too short," and looked him in the eyes.
"Why did you talk to me like that?"
He knew, but answered, "When? Like what?" And she
surprised herself, saying, "I've got no time for this.
We're here. You came and talked to me so nicely in there
tonight. Why didn't you before?"
The professor, her professor, was a boy then, confused, with
a man's way of evasion.
"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings," though he remembered
only his own feelings. "Have a beer?"
She looked around the room, low shelves of paperbacks,
doortop desk, kitchen door, bathroom door.
So little in so small a town. Why so little? She reached into
her purse. "Ah, yes,"
He said, toasting the book of poetry. "You still read Jeffers.
Good for you."
She placed it on the table like a gun, a card, an invitation.
He had to see
The pages swollen from constant reading, the way reading
had worn the cover corners round.
She saw it in a moment's hesitation, before he drank. She,
too, took a sip.
His eyes remained on the book cover's creases, white lines of
force; the poet's charcoaled face,
Facing her, though the carved eyes looked at nothing he
could see. She might have willed him
To speak, but when he did it was without the previous
flippancy. "Don't you think it's odd,"
Tom said, "that California in 'The Roan Stallion' has stayed
with Johnny? His presence
Is a punishment for her. Even when the stallion tramples
him to death,
Killing the horse for her is a greater loss than killing the
man or letting the horse kill him."

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Iris looked at the man across from her, wondering, "Was
this a test? Was there
An answer that he wanted?" She began to ask, "What do you
want?" But he leaned forward,
Forearms crossed on the table at his chest, the look on his
face ("Why, he's no more than four years older")
Said, "I have always wanted to know this. I think you know.
Please, tell me if you do."
"I think it's simple," Iris said. "They are married; they have
a child; they loved each other once.
Without him, what would California do? But that's not
Jeffers' point. The unhappy story
Of an abusive drunk, his wife and child, is not his point. It's
what such men could do
To California." Iris sounded so peculiar to herself. "Where,"
she asked inside,
"Did you get all that talk?" But it felt good, this new voice
talking. And the young professor
Lit up. "Why, it is simple!" he said. "Of course, the name's
symbolic; the child's, too—Christine,
For the vision of the baby Jesus the mother has. Mother,
child, and God—the horse."
Tom took a long drink, happy as a scholar in his carrel. But
Iris wasn't sure.
"That's the problem," she said. "It's always the problem with
Jeffers. Just when the people in his poems
Begin to look like people you might meet some day, they go
back to being only symbols."
She opened up the book. "Look how she drinks with him,
the husband. That's what a drunk's wife
Has to do sometimes; and has sex with him; and wishes that
the drink would knock him out.
But then she runs outside and lures him to his death."
"That's not her intention," Tom said.
"It's the drama that the story has to have." Iris held one
edge of the table.
The muscles of her forearm looked like welts. The other
arm pivoted on its elbow,
Her hand clipping the book, the finger buried between
pages. "Let me have the book,"

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Tom said. "Now, let me read you something." He gave her
the author's interruption on page 24,
The speech about evolving from humanity, breaking from it,
as atoms break.
"I don't believe that," Iris said. "Then, why read Jeffers?"
Tom replied and opened two more beers.
She put her hand across her mouth and spoke through
parted fingers. "I don't think I can tell you.
I have to. I love the poetry. I think there's something else
that he's not telling."
Tom laughed, "He tells us everything and more. He makes
it pretty clear what he believes."
A sob, a shiver in her chest and throat, surprised her. Tom
reached for her hand,
The one clamped to the table edge. "There's something he's
keeping back," said Iris, looking down
Into the cover picture at the eyes that did not look at her or
anyone.
"There's something." And let her hand be opened up and
another hand, the male hand, enter it.

*

Iris passed through the next day thoughtfully, as if a period
of grief had ended.
She recollected touch, her body brought it back, a warmth
returning here, then there.
Mama and Ruth watched TV all day. Charles worked among
his squash plants, lifting leaves.
Iris would find herself entranced and pull reluctantly away
from staring at
Nothing, but it was saddening, like a loss, as when he pulled
away. She didn't feel
What made her mother quiet, made Charles come indoors
every so often just to stand,
Drinking a glass of water, behind grandmother and child,
and watch TV. Iris was happy.
When Hoy and Rice came home that afternoon, the calm
lifted, crackling like crisp cash.
They shook the kitchen floor. Mama rose from TV-
watching. Charles followed them in.

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The brothers only spoke to one another, pleased with
themselves, in no hurry to please others.
"Well, that was different," Hoy said and popped a can of
beer and took a swallow. Mama watched.
Rice winked at Charles and laid a fat white envelope on the
table. "Go get the toolbox,
Mama, will you, please?" Mama, docile with anticipation,
brought it
From underneath the sink, the gray tin box that really was a
lunch pail with a combination lock.
Rice then replied to Hoy, "Strange little squirt. And that gal
with him. That was a girl?" Hoy laughed.
"I'm like you. I think it was. Tougher than him." They both
laughed, raising beers to their lips.
A pane of cloud that cooled the afternoon sun slid past and
light again turned sharp,
Catching every detail on the kitchen table—the jagged
surfaces of crumbs,
A gummy yellow residue no bigger than a baby's palm. Iris
pulled her gaze
Away. She stood with Charles and Mama, still ignored by
Rice and Hoy. "Tell you what,"
Said Rice. "I'll bet she runs the show." "You think so?" Hoy
looked curious. Rice nodded. "Yes,
That tough gal runs the show." And Hoy laughed.
"Whatever." Then, Mama, her own trance broken, took a
seat.
"You count the money now in front of me," she said. "I got
some things I need to buy."

*Now they have money and the woman I have been watching thinks
she has love. Now*
*Comes the spending. There is the older woman in new wig, her
young lover outfitted*
*In a slick suit for lounging with her in bars. The brothers have
attached points of silver*
*To collar tips and boot toes. They sit below the hedgeapples with
beers and let the women spend.*
*Soon the corn will be cut, the stalks dry, then cut, the tobacco topped
and hung where they dried*

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Their fortune, the hidden marijuana. Life is good. A new freezer
hums under the new carport.
The woman with the child drives into town to buy red meat and
chicken and ice cream
To stock the freezer. Full of happiness, she sees how the corn walls
in the road, then soybeans
Float along beside her, flat green reservoirs. She passes the brick
bungalows below
Their TV aerials, the hedges of red oak and stands of cottonwood
and locust, always at a distance,
The tobacco in ranks like plumed warriors. Life has changed a bit
with love and money.
She dreams no longer of the husband, the addict with his bruises
that he made her share.
She enters the black rolling meadow of the supermarket parking lot,
Bulged up among new buildings and a fringe of trees. She sees
things for the first time—
How every tree is just as black among its folds and niches as it is
green,
How sunlight hangs on each like drapery, like the moist heat itself.
She notices
Her daughter, almost five, skipping beside her into the store, and
buys a cheap set
Of jewelry, green plastic bracelet, earrings, and tears the objects out
of their container,
Lets the child adorn herself. She fills the cart with food, two carts,
lets the boy
Help her to the truck. She notices the soft mustache, like pencil
marks, on his lip.
Thin lips, a jutting chin, boy's face and grown man's body. And a
meanness. Is it the eyes?
They study her; they fall on the little girl, a wriggling Salome in her
adornments.
What is it? Disapproval? All this food? The two carts he must guide
back to the store?
She looks at her daughter, perched beside her in the truck cab, green
earrings, green as grass,
Necklace, bubble ring, and plastic watch, set off against her skin, a
peachy rosiness.
She must drive home now and remember love and money and a time
of liberty

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From worry up ahead. The vehicle retraces its way down narrowing roads,
Into the increasing isolation, where luck comes in its season, when escape is given up.

He almost can imagine me, thought Iris, pulling up beside the trailer's door.
And I can almost make him understand by speaking in his voice. She opened Ruth's door,
Then called for help with all these groceries. Hoy and Rice had been relaxing in the shade,
Charles and Mama trying on new clothes. The old Ford was still here. Iris called
With sacks in both arms and heard her mother in her voice, screaming, "Somebody
Get their butt in gear!" Ruth had hopped right up the steps, swung open
The door and stepped in. The air conditioner roared and dripped, its damp mark of condensation—
A place on the sun side of the house where butterflies edged down and put out their tongues.
Iris took hold of the door handle and wedged a hip inside and said again, "Will someone . . . ?"
She heard a doglike moan turn human. There they lay, the four of them, face down, arms bound
Like chicken wings, in the living area. Ruth stood at their feet and said, "That's Uncle Hoy and Uncle Rice.
That's Charles. That's Grandma," as if making sure she knew the names.
They all looked scalped at first. Mama's wig, a bloody ball, lay just above her head.
She was moaning, cut down to the bone by the shotgun blast, but still alive. Alive,
As Ruth and Iris were, thought Iris. Alive as we are, the two sacks in her arms. "That's Grandma's wig,"
Said Ruth. Iris saw the woman move. "That's Uncle Hoy and Uncle Rice and Charles,"
Said Ruth again. And Iris, in the last moment before acting, found herself
Thanking God for Ruth's sake they had gone to Kroger's.

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The cops stretched yellow tape around the mobile home.
Iris and Ruth found shelter with Tom.
Mama recovered in the county hospital. Hoy, Rice, and
Charles were stored for later.
School was beginning. Iris could tell Tom saw her now as
one with Ruth. Females in distress.
No talk of poetry. No silences together. Besides giving
sympathy,
All he said was "Freshmen to advise. Lots of work." But did
his breakfast dishes
And Ruth's and Iris's before leaving for the day. Then, it
was to the hospital
To sit with Mama. Or to the police station to answer
questions. It was simple
To say, "Yes, it could have been drug-related." Mama would
know, but Mama couldn't talk.
The money in the toolbox, under the sink (which had not
been touched), that was their money.
They had no bank accounts. The police looked at her and
understood. The FBI
Appealed to her intelligence. They complimented Ruth's
beauty and appealed
To Iris as a mother. They did not know about her poet who,
in her ear,
Was saying that the quiet places called for quiet suffering.
And she retorted.
No one could hear but when her eyes would harden an
interrogator paused and leaned
Toward her as if to listen. She retorted inwardly, "I don't
think it was quiet.
It wasn't on a cliff above the ocean, among cypresses and
boulders.
It wasn't quiet. Goddamn your presumption." Still, as
questions tapped at her and dislodged
Nothing, her poet was all she had to talk to. Mama in her
hospital bed slowly
Came back, her poor head fringed with ragged hair, the
blast having mowed the skull dome clean.
But she was empty, bare, as soon the hedgeapples would be.
Iris bought her a new wig,

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But she preferred a red bandana, as if to keep her bloody
scalp in memory
Of her two sons and her young manfriend. Burying them
took half of what they had. Iris counted
The months ahead, the money in the toolbox. The police
untaped the trailer.
The last cloud of FBI dust, driving out to the field's far
edge for evidence,
Faded. Iris brought Ruth and Mama home. The cut corn
was that dishwater stubble
That Iris hated, the blunted growth of nightmares. She saw
knots of winter wheat
In other fields and their own field with its stalks uncut, just
waiting, like wicker to be woven,
Like, she thought with dread, a field of matchsticks.

Her poet apologized for bad dreams. There was still in the
living room rug, when they returned,
The purple brown remains of the shooting. Mama went
directly to the TV
And Ruth, pausing a moment to survey and remember,
joined her grandma. Iris rolled the rug up,
And found the peppered shot holes in the plywood flooring.
They looked, in their maroon wash,
Like holes in roses. At this, she wept. When Ruth stood by
to comfort her, she wanted to say
That she was sorry, too, for her bad dreams. But, unlike her
poet's, these were real.
In her dreams, she was alone, watching the money dwindle
in the toolbox, her lover vanish
Into his reluctance—Was it fear?—and two children, Ruth
and Mama, to look after.
Mama held something back. She could take care of herself.
It was as if, like Tom,
She had decided to be an absence in Iris's life that Iris had
to care for.
And Iris couldn't tell the absences from presences any more.
Was someone out there?
If not close, now, still hidden by the dark that hung beyond
the circle of porch light?

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And if not on that close perimeter, then watching up the road? And if not there,
Then headed back this way with loaded shotguns? And if not, then sitting together, a knot
Of killers plotting to come? She saw Cale with them, and Tom, whispering about the dry corn,
The toolbox with a thousand dollars left, and all that bird seed, Cale said through split beak.
And Tom, showing his ruffled breast of sheet-white down, flapped his wings and said, "Except
The penalties, I'd sooner kill a woman than a hawk!" Iris woke. Grinning
At the TV, Mama watched a black and white old movie. Inside a house, a man and woman
Went berserk with fear, running from window to window. Outside, figures lurched into
The light, out of a curtain of shadow that combed back from their bodies, until, lit head to toe,
Off kilter, they came to hammer on the walls and windows. Ruth had found her way to bed
In Uncle Hoy's bed. Iris flicked off the set and Mama whined. She changed the channel
And Mama was content with Johnny Carson. He was talking about the weather
In Los Angeles. Iris stuck her head outside. There was the first frost-bitten moon
Of December. She could hear a drop of moisture on a fallen leaf freeze with a ping.
And then the uncut corn began to talk—a windless whispering of dew becoming ice.
Both gas tanks of the truck were full. She heard her poet's voice say, "California," as if
He called a woman's name. And the brittle comedian on the TV chattered in agreement.

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GILBERTO PEREZ

The Point of View of a Stranger: An Essay on Antonioni's *Eclipse*

Antonioni's *Eclipse* (1962) begins at the end. It is the end of a love affair that has lasted for some time and the end of a long night of quarreling between the lovers who are breaking up. In the light of an unreassuring dawn that is Antonioni's starting point, the man and the woman are exhausted and have little left to say to each other. We in the audience have missed the main drama and come in on the aftermath. As always with Antonioni, but to especially striking effect in this beginning, we're given no preparatory information about the characters, no explanatory dialogue such as conventionally would serve to clarify them for us. About these lovers we know nothing beyond what can be gathered, discovered, from the appearances of this particular situation into which we're plunged: we observe the man and the woman from the point of view of a stranger who somehow has come upon them during the last moments of their relationship. And yet this stranger that is Antonioni's camera observes them and their situation with a keen interest, a searching intentness.

Every work begins with an ellipsis, since it omits all that happened before the beginning; but Antonioni's use of ellipsis, at the beginning of *Eclipse* and elsewhere, differs significantly from normal practice. Normally an ellipsis is an omission of what, because implied, need not be stated or shown: the reader or viewer can be counted on to supply what's being omitted, as when, in an ellipsis that used to be standard in movies, a love scene would fade out during a kiss. "Ellipsis is an important formal property of modernist plots," writes Seymour Chatman in his recent study of Antonioni,[1] who indeed makes notable

[1] Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni; or, The Surface of the World* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1985), p. 79.

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use of ellipsis in a modernist manner. Unexpected, unexplained, and unresolved, the disappearance of Anna in *L'Avventura*—where Antonioni presents her as the main character until she perhaps runs away, perhaps dies in an accident or by suicide—is a memorable instance of a hole in the plot that serves to give it shape. But Chatman fails to draw a distinction between the classical ellipsis, the omission that can be filled in without reasonable doubt, and the characteristically modernist ellipsis, the omission that cannot. We don't know what happened to Anna in *L'Avventura*; we wonder what's been happening before the beginning of *Eclipse*; but nobody except Buster Keaton, as the projectionist in *Sherlock Junior*, is left in doubt about what happens after the fade-out during a kiss. An ellipsis in Antonioni typically marks an uncertainty. We cannot supply the missing piece with confidence: about the gap that's left open we can only speculate. The missing piece is truly missing, not merely a rhetorical omission but a felt lack in our knowledge.

What the characters are like counts for less in a work of fiction than the way they are presented, the way we come to know them. We feel we know the characters in a John Ford film, from our first, distinct impression of them, as if we had known them all our lives: a style of characterization, a way of knowing people, that belongs to the village, the small city, the cohesive community. "The face of every one / That passes by me is a mystery," wrote Wordsworth as far back as the early nineteenth century about the people in the streets of London: "Even next-door neighbours . . . , yet still / Strangers." "At every meeting we are meeting a stranger," says the psychiatrist in Eliot's *Cocktail Party*. Partially, gradually, inconclusively, as we come to know people in a modern big city, so Antonioni presents his characters: a style of characterization true to the uncertainty and estrangement of modern life.

An Antonioni film weaves a texture of incompleteness, partial views of arresting partiality, empty spaces, narrative pauses, spaces between imbued with heedful disquiet, pieces missing in the story and characterization and, image by image, sequence by sequence, in the camera's unfolding picture of appearances. "By a flawless and quite personal feeling for the *interval*," wrote Vernon Young of Antonioni, "he infuses his films with steadily mounting suspense. *Suspension* would be as

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apt a word: the moments hang, the passages of an hour are gravid with expectation; waves of emotion crest but never break; each image threatens to disclose a monstrous withheld truth or to discharge an act of violence forever hinted but always suppressed—heat lightning without thunder."[2] Antonioni's missing pieces should be distinguished not only from the classical ellipsis but also from the withholding of information in conventional narratives of mystery and suspense, a withholding that bespeaks knowledge of the answer—as when the criminal's face is teasingly kept out of view—and merely postpones a resolving disclosure. Asked about what happened to the missing Anna in *L'Avventura*, Antonioni, no better able than his film to answer that question, replied that he didn't know. Mystery and suspense in his kind of cinema, which offers an idiosyncratic modernist variant of that genre, stem from the resonantly uncertain, the hauntingly unknown, not the knowingly withheld and in due time disclosed.

Talk of the modern may sound old-fashioned in these days of the post-modern. Antonioni was a late modernist in a medium that, because new, was late to the renewing dynamic of modernism. Today he is out of fashion. Yet his concerns are still ours and his articulation of those concerns has lost none of its renewing energy. Without proposing to recast him in the fashion of today this essay suggests that we reconsider him in the light of the post-modern recasting of those concerns. His art endures as one of the sharpest and most pregnant renderings we have of our troubled age.

Like other modernist works, an Antonioni film designedly disorients us, not to promote confusion but in the recognition that our accustomed ways of making sense are no longer reliable, our received assumptions about the world no longer adequate, and in the attempt to find new bearings amid uncertainty, new ways of apprehending and ordering our experience. As seen through Antonioni's camera, our everyday world gives us pause: we're kept from presuming familiarity and made to look with fresh inquiring eyes. At once tentative and arresting, anxious and measured, intense and detached,

[2] Vernon Young, *On Film: Unpopular Essays on a Popular Art* (Chicago, 1972), pp. 188–189.

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Antonioni's distinctive visual style is much more than ornamental. Rather as Heisenberg's famous principle doesn't just declare but mathematically formulates uncertainty, and thereby enables its comprehension, so Antonioni's images render the uncertainty of modern life with elegant exactness, and thereby assert, in the face of a puzzling and precarious world, the endeavor of an arranging consciousness.

Antonioni is a great artist of doubt. No contented skeptic, he is a seeker, a seer, though not a seer of visions but one devoted to the visible, attentive to the nuance and transience of actuality, an unhurried yet eager and alert explorer of (to use Chatman's apt title) the surface of the world. Unsettlingly contemplative, everywhere prepared to revise impressions, suspend conclusions, Antonioni doubts not because he mistrusts appearances but because he trusts nothing else. Asked about the inconclusiveness that disturbs—is meant to disturb—viewers of his work, he responded by quoting an ancient natural philosopher, the poet Lucretius, whose words pertain well to our time: "Nothing appears as it should in a world where nothing is certain. The only certain thing is the existence of a secret violence that makes everything uncertain."[3] Even if nothing appears as it should—that is, clearly, fully, without concealment—Antonioni declines to assume access, the access that fiction conventionally provides, to a truth behind appearances. Truth for him is to be sought in appearances themselves, not behind or beyond them but in their shifting, elusive, equivocal, yet material realm. Neo-realism, which after the years of Fascism and war gave Italian cinema a vital fresh start and to which his own early documentaries marginally contributed, taught him to eschew studio fabrications and train his camera on actuality; but that, for the neo-realists, was enough to get at the truth, which they believed would transparently reveal itself before the camera's direct mechanical mimesis; whereas in Antonioni the quest for truth is seen to be a problematic and necessarily a partial, provisional undertaking.

[3] Antonioni quoted Lucretius in an interview at Cannes after *L'Avventura* was shown (and booed) at the film festival in 1959. The passage from Lucretius I give as worded in William Arrowsmith's preface to his translation of Antonioni's stories, *That Bowling Alley on the Tiber* (New York, 1986): a book mistreated by reviewers who think they can dismiss Antonioni as a fad of the sixties.

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Trained on actuality, his camera, instead of giving us a purportedly straightforward account of the way things are, conducts a watchfully circuitous, probingly dilatory, eye-opening interrogation of the opaque face of things. If the neo-realists (in André Bazin's words of praise) "put their faith in reality," Antonioni puts any perspective on reality, any account of it, in doubt. Observed with precision yet fraught with uncertainty, the world's appearances as Antonioni renders them seem under threat, as if that secret violence were always about to break out into his suspensive images.

Place rather than action, situation rather than event, is Antonioni's chief concern. Sicily, Milan, Rome, all three in summer, are the locales, vividly pictured, whose complexion and circumstance inform *L'Avventura*, *La Notte*, *Eclipse*, the trilogy that in the early sixties won Antonioni fame as the maker of films short on incidents and long on the spaces between. "Nothing will have taken place but the place": in him those lines from Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* may be said to have found their cinematic exponent. Action in the theater is abstracted from place; space in painting is abstracted from time; in the movies, which are a dramatic and a pictorial medium, action and place, space and time, can be integrated. Although he's more of a painter than a dramatist, the picture of place in Antonioni is not static or merely descriptive but animated by a sense of action, action that may not be occurring at the moment but whose wake—as at the beginning of *Eclipse*—or whose impending or potential occurrence reverberates through every moment.

Time in Antonioni is a time of the moment, a time that dwells on the space of the moment, not the dramatic time that in most films subordinates the moment to the overriding arrow of plot. Time in Antonioni is not a time of the what next but a time of the what now, not a linear but a lingering time that views each moment as a point of intersection of many lines of actuality and possibility. This suspensive time, in no hurry to move ahead to the next thing, often gives us the sense of our sharing with the characters an unabridged interval in the passage of their lives. Feeling immersed in the flow of their own time, we feel we inhabit a piece of their experience alongside them; and this may be a duration of little dramatic consequence, an aftermath, a wait, an abeyance, an uneventful space between, which

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heightens the sense of our sharing a personal, a private experience—something that wouldn't mean much to anybody else. The shared interval in Antonioni invites us into a curious intimacy with the strangers who are his characters, of whose privacy we partake without feeling we know them well and without being able quite to identify ourselves with them: an intimacy combined with an inquiring detachment. Such a pull and push is characteristic of modernism: a pull to involvement, an aroused impulse to empathy, and a concomitant push holding back that impulse and keeping us, not at an equable, comfortable aesthetic distance, but in an unsettled position both involved and estranged.

Drawing things out and cutting them short is the distinctive Antonioni rhythm, lingering and interruptive, suspensive and elliptical, a crisp deliberate pace, a restless, syncopated movement of unhurried attention. Normally a shot in a film will be held for just so long as it takes to show something with adequate clarity and make a dramatic point or an impression deemed appropriate. Almost every shot in Antonioni is held for at least a moment longer than that, so as to invite us to look again, reflect on the image, revise our first impression; but then, before we've had time to settle on a revised impression, a cut or move will shift our perspective. Antonioni's dwelling on his images serves, not merely to insist on their composition or content, but to encourage a perceptual questioning, a questioning that their succession alertly articulates; if we get into the rhythm of his observation, the pace of his films will seem fast rather than slow. A rhythm similar to that which animates his editing informs his plotting: the plot of *Eclipse* lingers and meanders and then, before we can reach conclusions, is cut short. Time in the closing sequence moves with a clipped expectancy that feels at once hopeful and ominous.

A kind of still life, nicely composed and held for a few moments, opens *Eclipse*: a row of books cut off by the right and bottom edges of the frame, a shaded lamp cut off by the left and top edges, and, blankly resting on the books, a white shape revealed to be, after its stirring prompts a slight panning movement of the camera to the right, a man's white-sleeved arm. Such compositions, momentarily harmonious within the

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frame yet incomplete, unstable, subject to revision from without, are typical of Antonioni; and so is the stillness that turns into movement that leads to discovery. The man in the white shirt looks glum and stares mutely at the younger woman in his company, who is not saying anything either and not glancing back at him. Through the alternate, disparate perspectives of these two unknowns we abruptly enter the scene; and gradually we piece together the setting, a modern well-appointed suburban house belonging to the man, and what we can surmise of the drama from an ending that for us is a beginning.

Endings, this beginning implies, are more often than not where we make our beginnings. It transpires that the young woman, Vittoria (Monica Vitti in her third Antonioni incarnation, acted with her engaging diffident verve), has decided she no longer loves the man and is gathering the resolve to leave him. He gazes at her hands, her face, her legs amid the legs of a table and chairs, as at a possession he sourly resists losing. Hurtfully he makes a show of not showing his hurt and maintaining his dignity. Regarded with a gentle edge of humor, he is throughout the sequence a study in male pathos, his sincerity inseparable from his posturing. Rather like the vanished Anna, this man, after an opening sequence that presents him as a main character, plays almost no part in the film except as a memory. "People disappear every day," to quote an exchange of lines from a later Antonioni film, *The Passenger*. "Every time they leave the room."

The opening onto a view, the window, mirror, picture, is a theme on which Antonioni plays many variations in the opening sequence of *Eclipse*: the window or picture and also its bounding frame, the opening along with its enclosing edges, which delimit the view and divide it from the viewer. When we first see Vittoria she is holding an empty picture frame and arranging objects within it, taking out a full ashtray, a remnant of the sleepless night, and centering a small sculpture, an instance of the modern art and design decorating the man's house on the outskirts of Rome. Like a film director, she arranges signs within a frame, an empty picture frame that brings to mind the frame of moving pictures, of this picture: a

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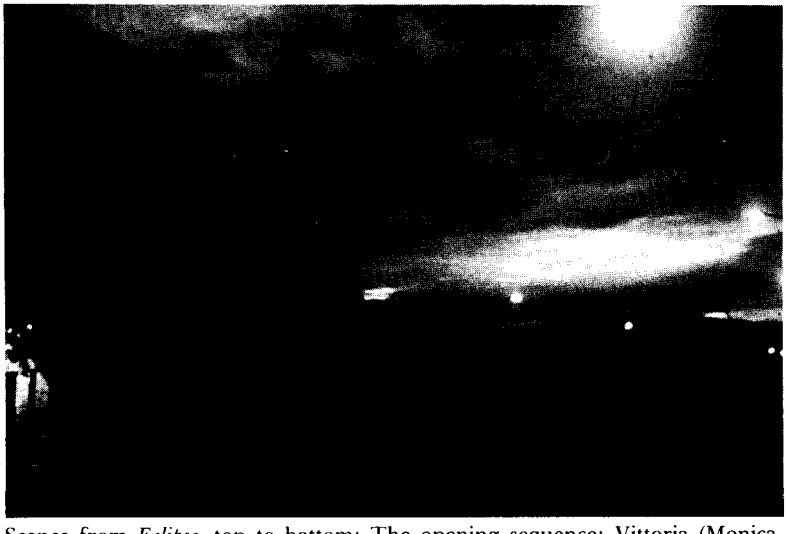

Scenes from *Eclipse*, top to bottom: The opening sequence: Vittoria (Monica Vitti) looking out a window at dawn; the last shot of Vittoria; the closing sequence: the suburban corner at nightfall. Courtesy: British Film Institute collection.

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set rectangle movable anywhere but able to include within its edges only a small piece of the world at a time, and ready to be emptied and filled according to the director's choice. Within the frame of nearly every shot in this opening sequence a frame of some sort appears, often a combination of frames. Pictures, large and small, abstract and representational, abound on the walls of this house, whose modern rectangularity and impeccable partitioning everywhere provide hard edges to frame a view. "What figure of today aesthetically best suits our streets, what figure aesthetically is best framed by our doorways?" asked Adrian Stokes in the thirties, and took his answer from gangster films: "the man in a long overcoat with hand within pocket holding a revolver on which his fingers tighten."[4] The architecture of a modern internationally styled house, Antonioni demonstrates, aesthetically best frames the figures of a parting couple no longer even quarreling.

An electric fan whirring, the lights still on, the curtains still drawn: nature seems shut out of this house until Vittoria parts a curtain and peeks at some trees in the morning light outside, the windowpane dividing her from the trees yet superimposing on them the reflected image of her face looking to their dawning verdancy. She proceeds to open curtains and look out of windows, large modern windows whose transparency to the outside encloses the inside within a glassed prospect of freedom, a bounding display of apparent openness and possibility; especially after she turns off the lights inside, the prospect outside looks like a picture being projected on a movie screen. (*La Notte*, which begins with the camera incessantly descending the glass exterior of a skyscraper in Milan, is Antonioni's sharpest reflection on the architecture of glass.) Finally bringing herself to break free from the cage of a moribund romance, Vittoria backs away toward the dark wooden front door, which flatly fills the screen except for her cropped figure hovering at the left edge. The door opens like a curtain as she leaves; cut to the man, downcast, framed by a large abstract expressionist painting behind him, the light on him dimming as the door closes behind her. Outside, as she goes toward and through the gate, a horizontal opening at the top,

[4] Adrian Stokes, *Colour and Form*, in *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes*, ed. by Lawrence Gowing (New York, 1978), Vol. II, p. 13.

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framed by the camera across the middle third of the screen, frames trees in the distance.

Near the end of his life—his career had ended long before—D. W. Griffith remarked that the cinema wanted what it had in his day, the beauty of the wind in the trees. Nowhere in cinema are trees more beautiful than in the Roman suburb pictured in *Eclipse*, not even in the luxuriant countryside of a Griffith pastoral such as *True Heart Susie*, where trees with leaves trembling in the wind evoke a permanence through change, a frailty that endures, like the frailty of Lillian Gish's Susie. The trees of pastoral are trees that, no less staunch for their trembling, reliably weather the storm and blossom after winter, symbols of the mutable endurance of nature. The suburban trees in *Eclipse*, vital though unsettled, their beauty colored with a fearful undertone, tremble in a wind that seems to carry not just nature's mutability but a more terrible uncertainty, and their agitated leaves evoke a precariousness unallayed by summer and the sun, a frailty that may or may not endure, like the frailty of Monica Vitti's Vittoria.

In her own world, among its inhabitants, Vittoria feels as if in a foreign country. Like Antonioni's camera itself, she views the world with probing detachment, with perplexed, reflective curiosity, the type of character in his films that Chatman calls a "witness." But the camera keeps its independence from her: though it often approximates, as often it diverges or departs from her perspective. From outside, through a window, we observe Vittoria, after she leaves the man's house, arriving alone in the early morning at her apartment in a glassy modern building nearby. The camera pans leftward with her, past a wall, so that we now observe her through a second window as, her gaze at right angles to ours, she looks out of a third at some trees in the wind that are framed for us, as if through a fourth window, by the edge of a wall and the screen's left edge. Through windows that repeat the window of the screen we look at her, the Antonioni witness who repeats our position as viewers, and at the disquieted trees at which she looks through another window. An epitome of the witness's position in Antonioni, and of our own analogous yet separate position of felt separation, this concluding shot of the opening sequence sums up the film's point of view. From the point of view of a

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stranger we observe Vittoria as well as the environment she observes from the point of view of a stranger.

Views framed apart from their viewers, pictures at least since Alberti—framer of Renaissance perspective—have been compared to windows on a reality divided from ours. Although more involving than most pictures in their representation of reality, movies nonetheless picture things through the window of a screen that, as Stanley Cavell says, screens. By calling our attention to the frame, to the fact of our being divided from the world pictured, Antonioni acknowledges in modernist fashion the medium and its mediation. In different ways he declares both the rectangular frame and the perspective of an individual viewing point, the two formal principles pictorially constitutive of the film image, inherited from the tradition of Western art since the Renaissance and mobilized by the movie camera. If a marked surface defines a painting, a movable frame and perspective pictorially define a movie.

In his films of the fifties[5] Antonioni set in motion a technique of long takes, with few cuts and fewer close-ups, his camera fluidly moving about, framing and continually reframing, the space off screen activated, the evolving viewing point asserted as an autonomous, searching consciousness. A typical Antonioni camera movement may start out following a character, then turn to another encountered along the way who after a bit will go on past the camera, which may now pause before proceeding in some other direction and coming upon a third character while the first will perhaps re-enter view in the far background of the continuing shot. Such an arrangement of shifting attention, of entrances and exits and paths variously crossing the camera's own path of gaze, will often make the dramatically central visually marginal and the dramatically marginal visually central. Antonioni's direction of attention calls into question where attention should be directed. We note his choice, note that at any moment it could have been otherwise, of a particular succession of framings and perspectives leading our eyes along this rather than an alternative path

[5] Antonioni's work of the fifties, which Chatman slights undeservedly, includes such remarkable films as *Cronaca di un Amore*, *La Signora senza Camelie*, and *Le Amiche*. It does not do justice to the achievement of these films to regard them as an apprenticeship on the road to *L'Avventura*.

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of gaze. From *L'Avventura* onward, his films combine the searching move with the terse cut, the fluid with the abrupt perceptual shift, the reflective pause that makes us look again with the interruptive concatenation of sharply different aspects that keeps making us look anew.

In bringing to our awareness his means of representation and expression, Antonioni isn't concerned only with matters of form: like all great modernists, he renders the acknowledged means of the medium themselves meaningful, metaphorical. The experience of empty space on the barren volcanic island of Anna's disappearance becomes in *L'Avventura* a guiding formal metaphor: empty space delineated and shaped, in a choreography of disparateness, by the crisscrossing paths of a camera and characters looking for the missing woman all around the island. Applied elsewhere in the film, this distinctive way of shaping empty space, sensing the space between, suggests an equation with the island as a site of absence and disparateness and of search for the missing.

The frames within the frame, salient in the opening sequence and recurrent throughout *Eclipse*, signify the characters' estrangement and make the frame itself, that formal constant of the medium, into a metaphor for our own estrangement. In *Cronaca di un Amore*, a tale of illicit love that was Antonioni's first fiction movie, the lines of perspective, the receding parallels pictured as convergent at a vanishing point, are accented in compositions that not only lead our eyes into the represented deep space (as Chatman notes) but also call our attention to the lines themselves and their pattern of pictured convergence by which linear perspective represents that depth. Lines that appear to meet but in fact endlessly recede, leading away from here to a vanishing point nowhere, symbolize the situation of the illicit lovers in this film, who brood over the past and worry about the future while enacting in the present a drama of powerlessness and inaction.

Modernism is an art of estrangement, in content and in form. It began with Baudelaire, Flaubert, Manet, citizens of the capital of the nineteenth century, painters of modern life who met its estrangement with their own. An alienated subject, in *Madame Bovary* or in *Mother Courage*, in Manet's painting of a barmaid at the Folies-Bergère or in *L'Avventura* or *Eclipse*, is rendered by modernism through an alienating form. It por-

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trays estrangement through the calculated estrangement that Brecht called an "alienation effect," not adding insult to injury but answering injury, and complicating sympathy, with the critical vision of a reflective art. The alienating form modernism sets up, the division it accents between artifice and reality, brings about a divided response to the alienated subject. As Flaubert both did and did not identify himself with Madame Bovary, and his novel articulates the split, so Brecht with Mother Courage, so Manet with his barmaid, and so Antonioni with his Monica Vitti characters. Asking us, as many works do, simply to identify ourselves with alienation is a way of tacitly ratifying it; putting it at a distance—but not a comfortable distance, so that we cannot simply detach ourselves from it either—serves to call it into question. "On to an alienated world," wrote Raymond Williams, "Brecht turned an alienated consciousness":[6] the questioning activity of an alienated consciousness is chiefly what, in modernism, the acknowledged means of expression themselves express.

Although supposed to be objective because it directly captures the look of things, the camera is in a sense always subjective because it depicts in each image the way things look from the viewing point of an individual observer. Whether or not this observer is represented as a character in the film, the imitation of an individual's perspective and perceptions is built into the camera. The conventional subjective camera, taking its cue from a character's glance directed at something off screen, turns to the object of the glance by way of a cut, and gives us a "point-of-view shot" through the character's eyes, a shot designated as subjective by the glance that leads to it and that usually, after another cut, follows it as well. This conventional demarcation between subjective shots, inserted within the brackets of a glance, and the rest, the presumably objective shots, Antonioni's practice artfully disestablishes.

In one scene in *Eclipse* a curious Vittoria follows a short bald man with reading glasses who has just lost a fortune in the Roman stock market. He goes to a drugstore for a tranquilizer and to a café for a glass of mineral water; from her inquisitive glance off screen the film cuts to her view of the man sitting at an outdoor table and gulping his sedative. But now this shot,

[6] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (New York, 1968), p. 290.

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conventionally subjective so far, lingers until he gets up and leaves and she enters frame from behind the camera: intruding into her own designated field of subjective vision, she advances well into the middle distance to the table he occupied, assuming the place in our view of the object of her curiosity, who, she sees when she picks up his scrap paper, has been drawing flowers. What starts as a point-of-view shot through her eyes becomes without a break—except a break in convention—a shot turning her inquisitive eyes on herself, so to speak, no longer a subjective shot from her perspective but a shot in which the impression of an observing subjectivity remains. Initially signaled by the character's glance, this subjectivity now belongs to the camera's own inspective gaze.[7] Modified, qualified, revised point-of-view shots are many in Antonioni; conventional point-of-view shots are few.

The impression of subjectivity arises when one senses the partiality of a view, the particularity of a point of view, when an incompleteness makes itself felt, an insufficiency in what the eye apprehends that leaves room for the play of sentiment and surmise. Normally a film will convey such a sense of partiality and insufficiency only when attributing it to a character in a point-of-view shot. Like a line of dialogue in a novel, a character's words set apart from the narrator's governing words, the conventional point-of-view shot is a character's view set apart as a subjective moment from the views that govern the storytelling. Pasolini compared Antonioni's technique in *The Red Desert*, his first color film and a work colored by the disturbed consciousness of its neurotic protagonist, to the technique in prose fiction known as free indirect speech: a character's words, not quoted as direct speech and marked off from the rest, but incorporated into the very narration and infusing it with the language and consciousness of that character.[8] Antonioni's film language articulates a subjectivity freed from the convention that restricts it to certain bracketed views

[7] In certain contexts nowadays that posit "the subject" (in translation from the French *sujet*) as the culturally constructed self, the word "subjectivity" is used to mean something like individual identity. I should perhaps make clear that I use the word "subjectivity" in its ordinary sense.

[8] Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, ed. by Louise K. Barnett, trans. by Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988), pp. 175–180.

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directly representing what the characters see. Declining the governing stance of superior knowledge usual in storytelling, his camera explores rather than governs, inquires rather than tells, from a point of view that feels as subjective as any character's—without consistently reflecting, however, any character's subjectivity. *The Red Desert*, a work verging on expressionism in the way it largely gives itself over to its protagonist's anxiety, is a special case for its director, whose more typical technique will switch, with deft unexpectedness, between passages of closer involvement with the characters and passages of dispassionate distance. Often more or less aligned with a character's perspective, and acquiring from that a staying subjective hue, Antonioni's camera arrestingly shifts in and out of such alignment in a process of perceptual reassessment that keeps drawing our awareness to the limited individuality of each viewing point. Whether approximating or not what a character perceives within the film, each of the perspectives this camera unfolds conveys the impression of subjectivity. Sometimes associated with, sometimes dissociated from the point of view of the characters, this pervasive subjectivity resides primarily in the camera's own point of view.

Home in the evening after the love affair ended at dawn, talking with a woman friend who has dropped in, Vittoria gets a phone call from a neighbor she hardly knows, a colonial woman from Kenya. She and her friend go over to a window from which they, and we with them, can see the neighbor at her balcony across the dark street; cut to a distant, haunting point-of-view shot, unmoored, unbracketed by any shots of the observer, from the neighbor's inferred perspective: the point of view of a stranger on Vittoria and her friend, now diminutive silhouettes at the lit window amid the darkness. From the window they subjectively look out at the world, and now the world, as subjectively, looks back at them. The effect is of our suddenly seeing ourselves as the world distantly sees us.

One pull to involvement in an Antonioni film is his keen documentary sense, his strikingly lifelike rendering of the look, the feel of things. Films are a pictorial and a documentary medium, a medium of pictures taken directly from a reality before the camera, but few filmmakers have been at once so

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concerned with pictorial arrangement as Antonioni and so attentive to the appearances of our reality. *Eclipse* is of his films perhaps the richest in vivid documentary perceptions. For the sequences at the stock market, the Borsa in the center of Rome, Antonioni hired real stockbrokers and brought them to their place of work on their day off; with the actors mingled among them, the fiction shades into a sheer documentary of the hectic workings of finance. Some find these sequences too long: "I got the point right away," complained Dwight Macdonald; but the point he got reduces to a simple indictment of unbridled greed Antonioni's open-eyed look, critical yet not scornful but interrogative, at capitalism in action. Action, fast-moving and aggressive, is certainly not lacking in these sequences, which, if a background to Vittoria's story, set off the sparse foreground with a welter of partially comprehended incident that we, like her, view from the perspective of a curious outsider. On the day whose dawning opens the film Vittoria goes to the stock market looking for her mother, wishing to talk to her about the love affair that has just ended; but her mother is too absorbed in the financial to talk about the personal, and amid all the market activity the main thing that happens in Vittoria's personal story is her briefly meeting Piero (Alain Delon), a young stockbroker with whom she's to start a new love affair.

Dawn, day, evening at home and on a visit to the neighbor from Kenya: in this film we feel the movement of the sun. Its title inspired by a solar eclipse that Antonioni filmed but decided not to include, *Eclipse* palpably "reminds us," as Cavell wrote, "that half the world is always eclipsed by the world itself."[9] The sun, the time of day and the time of year, the warm days and sweet evenings of summer, the trees, the sensate air: in this film we feel the rhythms, the fabric of nature in the life of the city and the suburb. Instead of erecting a dichotomy between nature and culture, Antonioni exhibits their interpenetration, their interplay. Nothing natural is not also cultural, for it is through culture that we apprehend nature; nothing cultural is not also natural, for it is with nature that we construct culture. In a film, and *Eclipse* keeps us aware that it is a film we're watching, we apprehend nature

[9] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1979), p. 142.

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through the artifice of pictures, documentary pictures constructed directly from nature. Film's combination of documentary and picture, both equally heightened in his images, Antonioni makes into a metaphor for the commerce between nature and culture.

The many photographs and other objects from Kenya in the neighbor's apartment, traces of Africa arranged into a suburban setting, motivate Vittoria to act out a bit of fun in that setting, an impersonation of an African native, with black make-up and a spear and records as accompaniment, that playfully expresses her sensuality and her fantasy of a simpler, more natural life. Her pretend native is for some a symbol of natural man in contrast to the stock market's civilized man. But the reverse is more nearly the case: the stock market brings out tremendous if misplaced human energy, and Vittoria's impersonation sets forth the notion of a return to nature as a fabrication of civilized man. Afterwards, while looking for the neighbor's escaped black poodle in the suburban summer night, Vittoria comes upon a row of tall, clattering flagpoles shaking in the wind against the dark sky, thin inanimate verticals that seem weirdly animate, pale lines trembling against black that suggest a ghostly, skeletal negative image of trees in daytime, a modern abstraction of trees in the wind.

Its edge parallel to the screen's left edge and at right angles to the descending horizontal of the runway in the background, the wing of a departing small airplane brings the film abruptly forward to the next day. In a form of plotting typical of Antonioni, a now lingering, now elliptical arrangement of time, the film follows Vittoria more or less in her own time through a segment of her experience, then skips forward to another segment like a stranger encountering her anew. She feels at ease on this airplane ride, up in the clouds—nature viewed through the means of culture—and at the somehow agreeable nondescript provincial airport where she lands; she turns this uneventful excursion into a kind of private pastoral, the camera weaving in and out of her point of view as she subjectively fashions another version of a return to nature from the materials of civilization. Sitting contentedly at the airport outdoor café, she glances at something off screen, and on her glance the film cuts, not to the

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expected point-of-view shot, but to Piero and his boss arriving at the stock market some days later.

So far the film has stayed with Vittoria, but now it switches to Piero and goes into a second, longer, more frenzied market sequence, which comes after the stillness of the peaceful airport as the first came after the stillness of the concluding love affair. Although this time an insider, Piero, takes us into the market, our perspective remains that of an outsider, immersed in the turbulent proceedings without knowing quite what to make of them. We miss Vittoria, whose position as the witnessing outsider would have provided something of an anchor in this sea of finance. This digression from her story continues until it becomes a story in its own right: it's as if the film were beginning again, with Piero instead of Vittoria as protagonist.

Vittoria's mother arrives as, on this day in the life of Piero, the market is taking a turn for the worse. Navigating this choppy sea, the camera in one shot follows the mother as she walks on after talking to Piero and nervously bites her lip; then he reappears in the background, dashing in the opposite direction and prompting the camera to veer back and follow him at his quick pace until, in the extreme foreground, an unknown woman with straining puzzled eyes behind glasses comes into view and brings the shot to a pause. By the time Vittoria herself turns up, her mother, among many others, has lost a fair sum of money. Vittoria's trailing outside the market the man who draws flowers seems by now less like a return to her story than like a digression from Piero's. The movement of Antonioni's plots is as digressive as the movement of his shots, as prone to shifts of attention, ruminative distractions from the central to the marginal that may become the central. If his films have been thought wanting in plot, this is largely due, as William S. Pechter wrote, to "their sense of 'found' narrative, of discovering their stories almost at random amid a number of other narrative paths not taken."[10] Distractive and exploratory, suspensive and peregrine, Antonioni's paths of plot have much the same quality and shape, on a larger scale, as his camera's paths of gaze around the local space of scenes.

Eclipse is a modern middle-class picaresque with two indepen-

[10] William S. Pechter, *Movies plus One* (New York, 1982), pp. 158–159.

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dent protagonists, a heroine and a hero whose differently motivated, winding trajectories, perhaps complementary, perhaps incompatible, happen to intersect. Piero's accompanying Vittoria to her mother's place after the bad morning at the market may be seen either as the tentative beginning of a story of romance or as a lunchtime interlude in the story of his day. Back at work, a young man tirelessly astir, he deals with peevish customers at the office, the losses they suffered, the money they owe his firm, in a briskly good-natured manner that is rather endearing. Past ten that evening, finally done with the day's work, he impulsively drives out to Vittoria's neighborhood and walks along her street, looking for her place. A woman leaving Vittoria's building attracts his attention for a moment; cut to a view from Vittoria's upstairs window, a shift to her perspective before he sees her and as she also observes the woman, who gets into a car and drives off. This sudden cut from his side to hers pivots on a stranger who transiently brings together their separate glances into a point of intersection. A second such meeting point of their attention, before she lets him see her, is a bearded, drunken man who staggers by and waves to Vittoria at her window, leading Piero's attention to her: these lovers-to-be come face to face through the oblique intermediation of two passers-by who might have diverted the narrative elsewhere. And now the drunk does divert the narrative: like the woman, he gets into a car and drives off, but this is Piero's sports car, and he drives it off into a lake in the neighborhood, killing himself—as Piero and Vittoria learn the next day, when they watch the car and its driver being retrieved from the water. Antonioni had planned to have them go to the lake that night and observe in the darkness the car's headlights continuing to shine underwater, but the circumstances of shooting did not allow it.

The paths of strangers in Antonioni, the paths of the stranger that is his camera, are an unsettling relativistic geometry mapping the space and time of modern life, a web of lines of orientation and disorientation that come together at unexpected meeting points and drift apart in directions unforeseen. Openness to distraction is for Antonioni not a failing (as Chatman thinks) but a responsive way of dealing with the diverse implicative claims, which may be extraneous or may be decisive, continually made on its inhabitants by a modernity that confounds distinctions between

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the central and the marginal, the important and the incidental, the story and the digression.

Errant and episodic, picaresque narrative follows the wanderings of a protagonist across an expanse of space and time. Like Joyce's *Ulysses*, another modern picaresque with two independent protagonists—an incipient father and son rather than an incipient couple—*Eclipse* compresses the space and time of traditional picaresque while retaining the journeying spirit, the sense of an exploration of life's possibilities, a charting of its terrain. From a frontal traveling shot of Vittoria, arriving at the lake the next day for an odd rendezvous at the scene of the accident, the film cuts far behind her and above and shows her meeting Piero in a sudden overview of the area that accents the road she has taken to meet him, no doubt the same road the drunk took with the car the night before. The road of life, as Bakhtin says, is a metaphor made real in picaresque narrative.[11] Evergreen branches, one of which Vittoria briefly grabs as she passes under, go by like markers of a progress in the foreground of an overhead shot traveling with her and Piero as they stroll away from the lake. At an intersection they come to, a corner distinguished from the others by nothing especial, Piero tells Vittoria that he will kiss her when they get to the other side. Cut to an overhead camera movement following them from behind and showing, on the pavement ahead, the white stripes of a pedestrian crossing, another set of markers of a progress that she further punctuates by pausing in the middle of the street and saying, part flirtatiously, part gravely: "We are halfway across." A casual wandering combines in this sequence with a feeling that the couple, without their planning it, are advancing toward a destination along a course observable from high perspectives, an all but fateful if meandering course leading to this intersection.

On the other side of the street is an unfinished building covered with straw matting and, it seems, no longer or not currently under construction. Leaves stirred in the wind, their green rendered in luminous, shaded tones of rippling gray, suddenly fill the screen before Vittoria turns to Piero by the unfinished building, inviting

[11] Like Bakhtin, I use the term "picaresque" in an extended sense referring not just to the story of a *pícaro* or rogue, Lazarillo de Tormes or Tom Jones, but to the story of any wanderer on the road of life.

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the kiss he hesitates to give her. But now *she* hesitates and shrinks from the kiss he twice attempts; the kiss suspended, she awkwardly departs, dropping a bit of wood in a metal barrel full of water as she turns the corner. In a movement that suggests the lingering perspective of Piero watching her go, the camera follows her from behind, pausing as she halts and, with something more to say, turns around to address him. Cut, not to a view of him at the corner from her perspective, but to a startling image of absence: the camera's own about-face keeps her in view as she faces the corner where she and we expect to find him, and we, who thought we had been sharing his perspective on her, are perhaps more startled than she to discover that he is gone. Her blond hair and white blouse, bright in the afternoon light, contrast with the dark trees fringing the corner and casting deep shadows about it while on her and elsewhere the sun shines: an eerie conjunction of light and darkness, the empty corner perceived as a pocket of night within the summer day, something like a Magritte painting of trees and houses at night with a daytime sky. Cut to Vittoria at home alone in the evening, dark against the electric light of a modernly designed lamp.

For her next meeting with Piero Vittoria arrives at the corner early and regards the place alone. Her arriving early bespeaks both an impatience to meet and a wish to wait and allow herself a private preamble to the meeting. Behind a pile of bricks at the building site, she enters view from the left and moves toward the right, the camera panning with her past the bricks, which look like a modern city of lilliputian scale and jutting, jumbled rectangularity. After she exits right the film cuts to the sky, a clear afternoon sky lined by the airy profiles of lights and slender trees, her head re-entering view at the bottom left and moving along the bottom edge of the screen until she again exits right. Crossing the line of her movement,[12] which on the screen appears flipped toward the left as suddenly she's the one who looks lilliputian, the film now cuts to our first encompass-

[12] Antonioni often breaks the standard rule of smooth continuity disallowing any cuts that "cross the line." The line not to be crossed is the line of a movement or a glance, for a cut across that line will reverse on the screen the apparent direction of the movement or glance, bringing about some disorientation unwanted in conventional filmmaking. I asked Antonioni about this matter the one time I met him, and he replied that he crossed the line "deliberately and instinctively."

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ing view of the unfinished building, a queer outsize box with bare scaffolding at the top and concealing curtain walls of straw and attendant trees. The relation of figure to landscape, the unfinished landscape of a modernity that seems always somehow under deferred construction, keeps changing under Antonioni's interrogative beholding.

Turning the corner and stooping over the water barrel, Vittoria is pleased to find the bit of wood she dropped, a tiny mark of her presence she left on water like the mark a more assured young lover might have incised on bark. She looks up toward the building, and we see from her perspective the straw covering gently waving in the breeze; she moves back a few steps and leans against a tree, the camera panning with her and bringing into view the white stripes of the pedestrian crossing. Poetry, said Novalis, makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. This ordinary suburban corner becomes suffused with a hovering strangeness, a coloring of the uncanny, but begins to gain a new familiarity as Vittoria and the camera return to its aspects and details. And now Piero, as if recalled by those crossing stripes that were the path to his announced kiss, returns too: from behind the tree, Vittoria turns to look at a harness racer with horse and sulky trotting along the street, and the camera follows this distractive passer-by past the tree and the crossing stripes, whereupon the arriving Piero comes into view. He's surprised to find her already there, for he too has arrived early for their meeting. Both of them, it seems, want to settle the corner sentimentally, to make its alien though quotidian space their own. They would make its familiarity their strangeness and its strangeness their familiarity.

The anxiety of disappearance, the reassurance of return: gone from the corner when Vittoria last looked in his direction and found a hollow of shadows, Piero comes back at the crossing of an incidental stranger's path and the path to a kiss. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud gives a well-known account of a little boy's assiduously played game in which the child would throw something out of sight and say, "gone," and then retrieve it and say, "there." This visual game punctuated by words seems to have been the child's way of compensating for his mother's frequent absences by symbolically enacting a mastery over absence and presence, disappearance and return. Films enact a similar inter-

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play between the seen and the unseen.[13] Whereas a painting makes a world visible, a film leaves most of its world invisible in each image on the screen. In a painting or on a theater stage anything outside the space of representation is not merely unseen but incapable of being seen, outside the realm of the visible. Painting and the theater are arts of presence but not of absence, since each wholly displays before us the realm of the visible, the place of presence. In the theater Anna could not have disappeared but only left the stage, the only place where she could have been found. Film is an art of absence, of partial views, an art that hides more than it shows. Usually, however, a film will satisfy our expectations of presence, much as the child in his game would return into view what he caused to disappear. When D. W. Griffith cut from an actor leaving a room to that actor entering a hallway, he established both the possibility of absence—because he was creating on film a space larger than the camera's range of vision—and a gratifying continuity of presence. An absence in a film, an emptiness, an incompleteness, a pointing to the unseen, is conventionally to be resolved by a presence. Antonioni is a master of the unresolved absence. Like the island in *L'Avventura*, the corner in *Eclipse* is a place of absence and of search for the missing, the missing that Vittoria and Piero seek in a quest not so much physical as sentimental, but the sentimental dwells in the physical and their quest dwells centrally in this unlikely suburban crossroads they would romantically appropriate.

Piero takes Vittoria not to his own place but to his parents' large, ponderous apartment, shut in but seemingly no longer lived in, a gloomy enclave of the familial past. Neither his place nor hers is at any point in the film a place where the couple spend time together. Earlier they went to her mother's, now they go to his parents', their old homes where they don't feel at home. The corner is their space if anywhere is. It represents their unfinished

[13] The interplay I have in mind is not the one theorized by followers of Jacques Lacan, who think we "misrecognize" what we see represented on the screen as a reality present before us, so that supposedly we get caught between an illusion of presence and the fact of absence. When watching Greta Garbo on the screen we may be captivated, but surely we well recognize that what we're watching is an image, a representation, not an actual presence. The interplay I am proposing to consider takes place in the realm of images, of representations of presence and absence.

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endeavor to make a place for themselves at the intersection of their errant paths.

On arriving at the foreign inner space of Piero's family, Vittoria looks out of a window and sees a woman across the way who quickly retreats into the darkness of *her* window, like a ghost vanished into a homely gloom. A window frames a view of the outside for an observer inside; here two windows, two observers, two dark insides, face each other like mirror images and cancel the outside view. Withdrawing into dim parental rooms after her dress gets amorously torn, Vittoria opens the shutter of another window and looks to the sunlit outside. Her leaning forward prompts two successive point-of-view shots: the white square tables of an outdoor restaurant, a lone soldier at a corner, distantly seen through her eyes in the near empty small piazza below. Again she leans forward, but now, in an astounding shift away from her perspective, the film cuts, first down to the piazza, then to a view of her at the window as distant as her view of the piazza and as subjective, through the eyes, we feel, of someone out there, some unseen stranger watching her watch. Like the sudden long shot from the inferred perspective of the neighbor telephoning, this strikes us as the distant viewpoint on ourselves of an unmoored subjectivity: the world's reverse angle on the self. Cut to the self's answering angle, abstracted, unbracketed by the observing Vittoria, in two further point-of-view shots, the second a lingering glimpse of a few persons coming out of a baroque church: what Vittoria sees from the window and the stranger's glimpse of her at the window face each other like mirroring outsides and cancel the inside viewpoint. Denied the advantage that an insider's vantage point usually has, her perspective is as much as the other the point of view of a stranger, an outsider. Cut to the dark interior of the parental apartment, a constituted inside no more accommodating to the self than the otherness of the outside world.

The clarity and completeness of a Renaissance painting imply the vantage point of a privileged inside, an inside enabled to gain, through the Albertian window, a commanding view of the world pictured outside. Expressionism, which turns the insider's look into a frightened stare, nonetheless presents it as a privileged viewpoint from which to apprehend the essential expressionist truth, the anxious irreparable breach between the

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injured self and a fearful world. Neither classical nor expressionist, Antonioni's art waives an insider's position of advantage and conducts an outsider's troubled, fascinated inquiry, adroitly disorienting and reorienting, into the perplexing appearances of our reality.

Poised at the window between a cavernous inside and an outside bathed in emptiness, Vittoria turns to Piero's embrace in quest of love as the presence that will dispel absence. "Romantic love, in the modern sense," wrote John Berger, "is a love uniting or hoping to unite two displaced persons": a love seeking to overcome "the displacement, the homelessness, the abandonment" of modern life.[14] If *L'Avventura* is about love's weakness, and *La Notte* about love's failure and love's ghost in a modern marriage, *Eclipse* is about love's chances of success. Vittoria and Piero are Antonioni's most appealing, most hopefully depicted couple. The brisk stockbroker and the tentative young woman moodily emerging from a long love affair, his nervous energy manifested in the impatience of doing, her nervous energy manifested in the impatience of pondering, are not a bad match: he gives her motion and she gives him pause. He may be thought insensitive, she may be thought tiresome, but Antonioni presents them both with a sympathy that recognizes their shortcomings.[15]

[14] John Berger, *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos* (New York, 1984), pp. 65–66.

[15] Chatman treats this couple with platitudinous condescension: "How different is a motor intersection from a square or piazza, the traditional meeting place for lovers! The intersection evokes what is most transitory, casual, and ephemeral in our society . . . In the age of the sports car, people go through lovers like water through sand on a beach. The beginning of a relationship (the very word suggests preprogrammed triviality) is already the middle, and the end is clearly in sight. We do not need to be shown how things end . . . " (Chatman, *Antonioni*, pp. 108–112.) Obtusely uncomfortable with Antonioni's use of ellipsis, Chatman keeps explaining away the gaps left open in our knowledge and telling us that we don't need to be shown the things omitted. In Antonioni's rich and strange portrayal of Vittoria and Piero's corner Chatman sees nothing but a boring barrenness, to which he imputes a determinant effect on the outcome as if Antonioni's settings were in some simple theatrical correspondence with what happens in them—a cozy piazza for a romantic scene, an old dark house for a ghost story, a barren corner for a relationship doomed to failure. The word "relationship," by the way—a word signifying, as Raymond Williams says, both a relation and the parties involved in that relation—should be defended against the frequent snobbish attacks it has received from self-appointed guardians of our culture. Perhaps the most interesting thing about Chatman's discussion of *Eclipse* is his managing to admire a film that, in his view, is ponderously devoted to a preprogrammed triviality; one would have expected him to concur with Pauline Kael's philistine dismissal: "I wouldn't go see *Eclipse* again unless I was tied down and gagged . . . "

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Eclipse is a boy-meets-girl—or girl-meets-boy—story, but one with a curious shape. It may be divided into four parts: Vittoria; Piero; Vittoria and Piero; neither Vittoria nor Piero. For more than half its length, it follows first the girl, then the boy, before the two start meeting as a couple; and, soon after their becoming lovers, it ends without them, in a mysterious cadence of suburban dusk, leaving their future together an open question. If *Eclipse* begins at the end, it ends at the beginning.

Every work ends with an ellipsis, since it omits all that happens after the end; but the ellipisis that ends *Eclipse* leaves everything in haunting suspension. This ending is Antonioni's boldest and most resonant unresolved absence. Several commentators, Chatman among them, have attempted to fill in this final ellipsis with the unwarranted conclusion that the young lovers will be seeing each other no more. To be sure, this is a disquieting, not a happy ending; Vittoria and Piero's relationship might be over, or may not last much longer; but the last time we see them, in Piero's otherwise empty office during lunchtime—the long lunchtime of Mediterranean countries, with a summer breeze blowing in through the open windows—the two seem pretty happy, a lively and playful if still tentative couple. As she's about to go and he to return to work for the afternoon, their mood turns pensive and rather somber; embracing, they promise to see each other tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and the day after that—and tonight. All we know for certain about their future together is that neither she nor he keeps their appointment—maybe they called it off, maybe they changed it to another time or place—to meet that evening at the corner. The camera keeps the appointment.

Picaresque narrative, from its ancient ancestor in the *Odyssey* to a modern rendition such as *Ulysses*, typically ends with a homecoming: the wanderer on the road of life eventually finds home. Home in *Eclipse*—or the closest thing to it, a home as yet unfinished and precarious, no more than a potential for a home, but a home that draws the camera even if not the characters—is the suburban corner, the dubious and lonesome intersection that Vittoria and Piero have made their meeting place. This is a home outside, a sentimentally invested piece of common ground, the inside represented by the concealed

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unfinished building: the inward as well as the outward remains under construction.

As if at once impatient for the expected appearance of the lovers and wishing to wait and allow itself a private preamble to their meeting, the camera is hours early for the appointment, though its waiting time, compressed by Antonioni's stunning montage, takes less than ten minutes on the screen, starting at mid afternoon and, the couple having failed to turn up, ceasing as night falls. A film that began at dawn, and that all along has kept us in touch with the circling of the sun, fittingly ends at dusk. A concluding dawn and an inconclusive dusk: the beginnings and endings of nature guide but do not dictate the beginnings and endings we make. The subjectivity of Antonioni's camera, the sense of its gaze, its point of view, as belonging to a distinctive individual eye, an autonomous percipient mind arranging our awareness, makes itself felt with peculiar eloquence in this extraordinary closing sequence in which the camera at day's end comes to a home that seems to have no other dwellers.

On arriving at the corner, the camera looks, not for Vittoria and Piero, who wouldn't be there yet, but for the familiar sights of their previous meetings there. Again the unfinished building, the pile of bricks, the water barrel, the camera panning to where Vittoria stood beside it and, from the place that was hers, cutting to a view of the building with its straw covering from the same angle that was her perspective. Again the harness racer passes by, and the camera follows him just as before, but now there is no Piero at the juncture with the pedestrian crossing. Now a stranger, an unknowing usurper, we feel, of that path to a kiss, crosses the street at a slight diagonal, with a casual disregard for the lines on the pavement that marked a progress. Again the luminous, shaded leaves ripplingly fill the screen. In a personal, a private experience that wouldn't mean much to anybody else, we share with the camera a recollection of the lovers through a beholding of things associated with them, things that for the camera, for us, carry their memory and at the same time point up their absence.

The camera wants to see the corner as the lovers' place, and looks for the imprint of their past there, yet recognizes that this setting of unfinished modernity, this site of absence even with

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them present, consorts oddly with a retrospective, rather elegiac mode of beholding. Without straying far from the corner or from the mood of anticipation of the lovers' appearance, the camera turns its searching attention to other things, other people in the neighborhood at the day's end. Nothing unusual happens at the end of this day. A view of the neighborhood from high above, its sparse stretch all calm except for a lone car moving in the tree-lined distance, slowly pans toward the corner and centers it on the screen as crossing diagonals within a rectangle. In quick, still succession, two separate women are seen standing, waiting. Its movement taken apart into three shots concatenated like distinct stages of a wave's breaking, a bus turns the corner and stops, letting off two passengers, a man and a woman who go in different directions. A newspaper the man reads talks about the prospect of atomic war, a subject much in the news then, around the time of the Cuban missile crisis. The water barrel has started to leak, and the camera gazes in wonderment at the water running out as at an abstract pattern that probably has no meaning. Children play in the background of a sprinkler watering the grass; we recall that Vittoria and Piero played with this sprinkler, which is now turned off; leaves drippingly fill the screen. All the things we see in this sequence, little and large, are incitingly poised between a possible symbolic reading—the draining water barrel, for example, as the draining energy of a relationship unlikely to continue—and a precise documentary rendering of the detail and circumstance of a particular time and place.

Nature perceived and arranged by an active, reflective consciousness: a daily movement of nature, the gradual and inexorable onset of night, the eclipsing of half the earth by the turning earth itself, Antonioni's camera dissects into charged fragments of the uneventful and articulates as an expectant, apprehensive movement of mind. Each shot in this sequence pins down a moment; each cut crisply makes palpable the passing of time as afternoon gives way to evening, daylight to twilight, twilight to darkness. Culture and nature: a modern building, pale and rectangular, with a serrated edge of balconies, divides the screen with the foliage, rounded and quivering, of dusky trees. Cut closer to the balconies, still closer; as persons watch the sunset from the roof, a long thin cloud being

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left in the wake of an airplane lines the darkening sky. A thin curving streetlight that seems to grow out of the rounded dark top of a tree, like a cross between tooled metal and organic nature, electricity rising from foliage, glimmers and brightens with the artificial light of modern night. As trees get dark, streetlights, their partners in lining the suburban streets, shine. In this film we feel a correspondence, an exchange, between nature's light and dark and the answering light and dark of culture.

In the near darkness, another bus turns the corner and stops, letting off several passengers, none of them Vittoria or Piero. For a hovering moment, the camera follows these strangers walking away, all no doubt headed home in the suburb at the day's end, but doesn't keep up with them and instead anxiously glides toward its own sought home in the corner. Cut to a long shot of the tenebrous empty corner, the unfinished building dimly lit by a single light bulb that yet saves it from seeming quite abandoned; pan to an intersecting street, lined on one side by trees now scarcely visible, and on the other by a row of streetlights shining like stars and receding into the obscure distance. Cut to the final image: a blinding close-up of a streetlight, like a staring into the sun, the sun of the projector that shines on the artificial days and nights of the screen. Called by some a paradoxical eclipse by light, taken by others as suggesting an atomic explosion, this sudden dazzling halt of the progressing gloom may also be construed as a bright new day that our artifice may yet bring about.

Besides marking an uncertainty, an ellipsis in Antonioni poses a generalizing question. Why are these lovers breaking up? we wonder at the beginning of *Eclipse*, and, lacking acquaintance with the specifics of this case, we're led to ponder more generally the troubles of unsettled modern love, the sentimental homelessness of our time. It doesn't matter so much whether Vittoria and Piero will or will not stay together after the film ends; if they drift apart, other unforeseen romantic intersections will surely detain her path and his; but on the quest for home the two enact and represent, not a private haven fending off the world outside but a humanly satisfying place we can all inhabit and make our own, hangs the fate of our culture, our nature.

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BETH McGRATH

The Music Underneath

I worked for Charlotte Beresford for several weeks before she told me about some of the au pairs who had preceded me: the Finnish girl who had an affair with the pub owner and got pregnant, the Dutch girl who kept a bottle behind the window curtain, not realizing the diminishing contents of her bottle was visible from the courtyard outside the house. Charlotte told me these stories in an amused tone, and I wasn't sure if her telling me was a sign of trust or a warning.

I had flailed my way through several majors at college, a term at a music conservatory, and a brief stint as a musician in the Boston subway, when I was accepted as the student of a prominent violinist who lived in Oxford. Kato's acceptance letter seemed like a sign, a marker of turning towards a more orderly life. I managed for several months on a semester abroad program, but when the term was over, I wanted to continue my lessons. Working as an au pair seemed the cheapest way to stay in England; work permits were difficult to get with so many people on the dole. Thinking back, it seems funny that it was music which led me to Charlotte and Barrington, when so much of what I learned there had to do with silence.

I found Charlotte's advertisement for an au pair in a small market in Oxford. When I called on the phone, her accent was distinct and upper-class, but her voice was warm, spilling over its edges. We arranged to meet at the train station the following Saturday.

Waiting at the station, I watched parents retrieve their sons from boarding school for the weekend. The boys huddled on the platform in navy blazers and short gray pants, swatting each other with their satchels until they spotted the car which had come for them. Some left their friends reluctantly, while others, thin legs below their shorts, hurried to their mothers to be

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enfolded in wool and perfume. On the phone Charlotte had said she had three children; I'd forgotten to ask their ages. I looked up the hill at the dark steeples and square towers set against the flat sky. The constant gray depressed me, like a sullen child who pouts and threatens tears.

A small white car pulled up, and a tall, thin woman with long auburn hair climbed out. She moved quickly and loosely, her walk made her seem younger than she was. She wore a jade-colored sweater, loose around her neck, and low boots with slender high heels. The sweater set off her bright hair and brown eyes. Her nose was pointed and delicate, her mouth too wide. She was pretty in a well-tended way, her nail polish matched her lipstick. Suddenly, I felt dowdy and unplanned. I was wearing the only skirt I'd brought with me, an act of deference on my part. My usual outfit was a pair of overalls and sneakers, anything else seemed to require too great an effort.

Driving back to the house, she explained that they lived in Barrington, a small village outside Oxford. She talked about her family as if I were a friend she had not seen in a long time. Her husband, David, was in the Philippines on special diplomatic assignment. He used to be with the Foreign Service and they had recently returned from living in Delhi for two years. She said she found it difficult to live without servants now, then she looked over at me.

"Of course the girls who come to stay with us aren't servants. We want someone who'll be a part of the family while they're with us. We have fun—lots of parties and guests and visitors." She turned to smile at me, hinting at something exciting below the surface of things, something that could not be told yet. In the following weeks, I saw how Charlotte thrived on anticipation in an almost child-like fashion. She gave dinner parties with unexpected themes. We'd make invitations from cloth or exotic paper, and she'd waggle her long fingers and describe a potentially disastrous or intriguing seating arrangement. She also used her enthusiasm to be charming with men, describing an upcoming party or fête with expectation in her eyes. "The house is a lot of work to keep up and I just need to have *some* help. David doesn't understand it, but he's away so much. Of course India *is* very different. You can't live without servants. They go to market for you, cook, it's easy to get spoiled." She

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smiled at me, implying that if I were to marry an ambassador or attaché that I would come to the same conclusion.

She said that Helen was fifteen, mad about horses, and they kept a pony on a neighboring estate. Rupert was thirteen, going off to school and he didn't want to go. He wasn't old enough to understand how important the right schools were. He felt it was unfair he was being sent away just because he was a boy. Cary, Caroline really, was five, and well, precocious. After hesitating a moment Charlotte said, "One thing I like to make very clear, I do not allow anyone to hit my children. Cary can be difficult, but if there's any punishment like that, I will take care of it."

I wondered how horrible Cary would be. In the following weeks I found she was slightly spoiled and very intelligent. She would store up a series of questions which she unloaded before bedtime. She annoyed Charlotte with questions also—who was on the telephone, where was she going—and I didn't understand Charlotte's annoyance at her persistence until I understood what she had to hide.

Barrington consisted of about twenty thatched-roof houses, Mr. Busby's grocery store, a church and two pubs. We turned into a gravel driveway which swept around a small stone fountain. The massive stone house, covered with vines, overshadowed every other house in the village. Charlotte explained it had been the Rectory of the church across the way.

I should stop here to say that as we pulled into the driveway, I had the premonition that I would be immersed in something I didn't understand yet. On the phone I'd made it clear that I needed to practice. I was not here for the "experience" of living in a foreign country. But crunching into the gravel drive, I felt on the edge of something I couldn't name.

The phone was ringing as we walked in the door. Charlotte rushed off to answer it, leaving me in a large entrance hall filled with heavy oak furniture. Life-size portraits of someone's ancestors, set in thick ornate frames, rose up the wall of the wide stairway. After waiting for several minutes, I walked into a study off the main hall. The room was filled with small paintings and engravings. I stared at the tiny worlds they contained, and tried to imagine living in as many countries as Charlotte had. I wondered how her life felt to her, if it seemed

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like a long series of compartments, separate, but somehow related; or if the different phases had grown into a netted accumulation, as if everything added up to where she was now.

Charlotte finally returned and we went into the garden to meet Helen and Cary. Helen had long brown hair, fair skin and a slow smile. She was struggling with a bridle she had taken apart to clean for Pony Club inspection. I asked a few questions about her pony and she launched into an evaluation of his likes and dislikes, faults and strengths. She poked at bits of dried soap in a buckle as she talked, absorbed by the world of horses in the way girls are when they haven't started worrying about boys and clothes and makeup.

Cary had tiny freckles and enormous blue eyes, her mother's eyes in another color. Her soft hair was a shade between brown and blond. She smiled at me shyly, already conscious of her charm, and reported that Rupert had gone off with a friend. Charlotte nodded absently and suggested we fix lunch.

Afterwards she drove me back to the train station and offered me a job. She seemed surprised, and slightly relieved, by my quick acceptance. We agreed that David would pick me up at the train station two weeks from that day.

As the train rocked through the late afternoon, I suddenly felt I had been in England for a very long time. I don't mean that I was homesick; it had more to do with that drawn-out sense of time which is part of being in a foreign country. It felt strange to imagine that the other students would be going home, or traveling in Europe, while I might stay the same length of time once over again. The summer stretched in front of me.

When I arrived at the train station two weeks later there was a man who looked like a Burberry advertisement standing on the platform with a boy in his early teens. I recognized them by the way they stood, not talking to each other. David picked up my suitcase and Rupert asked if he could carry my violin. When he felt its lightness, he held it like a machine gun and made a staccato sound in his throat.

"Rupert, the sound effects are unnecessary." David spoke without raising his voice or even looking at Rupert.

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Rupert looked over at me. I smiled behind his father's back. He grinned and carefully set my violin on the back seat.

On the ride to Barrington, David asked where I had been at school and where my parents were from. Rupert sat quietly in back staring out the window. I knew his father's small talk infuriated him. He was a thin boy with a round, childish face. He wore his hair cropped short, and torn black jeans. In the mirror, I saw him watch a group of girls hurry past the skinheads clustered around St. Giles. I thought how different David and Charlotte were, remembering how she had confided Rupert's unhappiness, and restlessly smoked a cigarette.

My schedule at the Beresfords' was convenient for practicing, but it was several weeks before I understood how convenient it was for Charlotte also. Three afternoons a week she was a guide at Blenheim Palace, Winston Churchill's family estate. She always went off in a pretty dress and perfume, and returned with anecdotes about her tour group or the other people who worked at the Palace. Her enthusiasm for the job didn't strike me as unusual. Later I felt foolish I hadn't noticed how she fussed over her makeup and hair, how cheerfully she rushed around the kitchen making sure we had everything for dinner before she left the house.

As soon as we'd met, Charlotte talked to me as if I might understand her. It was a form of flattery I had not yet encountered, the kind that can only be dispensed by someone who knows or guesses they are admired. Until I met her, my close friends were students my own age. We felt adult, detached from our childhoods. We didn't yet see our parents as people much like ourselves. Charlotte spoke to me as if I understood the intricacies of running a household, of being a woman. Her inclusion elevated me to a world of exotic travels and lovers in distant places. Her sudden moods, or a half-finished sentence completed with a gesture, made me feel I was hearing a piece of music that was foreign and somehow familiar.

Charlotte and I did the cooking and housework together. She was usually running late, pulling pans and kettles out of cabinets, turning the burners on high. She moved in her kitchen the same way she did outside. She would brush by a pot on the stove or come close to spilling something, always missing

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by a hair. We usually had guests for dinner, and Charlotte insisted on hot plates, warm rolls, and linen napkins on the table. When I first arrived, I felt as if in a frantic cartoon, but after a while, I got used to the slow afternoons of cooking and gossip, and the last-minute rush of putting dinner on the table. When a guest complimented Charlotte on an unusual dish or presentation, she would smile at me across the table, knowing I understood the mishap which had caused our culinary improvisation.

One afternoon, in the midst of cooking, the phone rang. Charlotte answered it, and told me she'd take the call in her study. When she came back, her mood had changed. She ripped the paper off the roast we were making for dinner, and dropped it in the pan with a thud. She began to talk about how difficult she found David's absences. I had guessed he would be leaving sometime soon, but I didn't know when.

"He expects me to handle everything by myself, but when he comes back, he wants to be in charge of everything again," Charlotte muttered. She pulled a cutting board toward her and grabbed an onion.

"Did he tell you just now, over the phone?" I asked. It seemed an abrupt announcement, even for David.

"No, that wasn't him," Charlotte said. She didn't look at me. Her eyes were red. I couldn't tell if it was the onion or tears. I dug a dark spot out of a potato. I wasn't sure what to say.

"I'll go get Cary from school," she said. "I could use the walk."

She dropped her apron on the counter and hurried out the door.

Charlotte's disclosures unsettled me, her life seemed so perfectly finished. I believe this same thought had occurred to her, but with a different inflection, that her life was perfect, and somehow concluded.

One Sunday we had a former ambassador and his wife for dinner, and then an Oxford don and his daughter for tea. As soon as we finished with one batch of guests, we had to prepare for another. That evening, Charlotte and I were quiet as we cleaned up. She handed me a washrag, and at the same time brushed my bangs out of my eyes.

"Your hair grows so fast, we'll have to go into Oxford this week. I'll bring you to the man who does my hair." She held her

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hand on my head for a moment and looked at me. She'd been talkative all day, now the animation had left her face. Her eyes looked large. She looked older.

David wandered into the kitchen.

"Sundays always seem like one long eat." He sighed and turned on the kettle. "The Ingrams are so boring," he continued, "they both talk at the same time, across the table. I kept imagining how they'd look if we could turn the sound off."

"We invited them because they've had us for tea *twice*." Charlotte's voice was furious. She twisted the rag she held in her hands. "I'd prefer not to see them at all. You don't think about how much work it is for me to be bored by them."

David looked up, surprised. Charlotte threw the rag on the counter. It made a loud slap, and she stalked out of the room. David looked after her, then followed her out of the kitchen.

I'd never seen her so angry. As I cleared up, I thought how little they spoke when they weren't entertaining. David talked about his garden, or politics, but I couldn't remember him ever making a personal comment. He would ask Helen about her pony, or Rupert about school, but their answers seemed to evaporate before penetrating him. He never acted more than mildly affectionate towards Charlotte. His household revolved around him without engaging him at all, like something he had once set in motion which now had a life of its own.

Shortly after that night, David left for the Philippines again. In the evenings Charlotte and I sat on an overstuffed sofa in her study and talked late into the night. Sometimes Helen sat with us, absorbed in a book or flipping through a catalog of horsey things. She was quiet by nature, and relieved by my presence in a way; she wasn't old enough to be interested in her mother's fascinations. Charlotte asked about my life in Boston, and about my adventures in London before I came to them. I was flattered by her interest. She confessed that she didn't know what to think when she first met me—she wondered if Barrington would be too quiet for me. After Helen went to bed, we talked about the children. She also asked me about menus, and who I thought we should invite for dinners. I was learning from her that much depended on how things were presented.

Charlotte also talked abut South America and India. She told me about being single and living in New York. I imagined her

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laughing at cocktail parties, her shiny hair piled on her head, anticipating the unexpected. When she talked about those times, I felt that I was on the verge of an extraordinary life. I would finish school and something wonderful would happen. This was part of Charlotte's allure, her sense of anticipation was infectious. Her smile made you feel that an adventure was hidden just around the corner.

Late one afternoon Rupert walked into my room. I was sitting in an armchair with music spread across my lap, marking bowings for a new sonata.

"Rupert! You might knock," I said, annoyed. "I might have been changing or something."

"But you weren't," he said.

My violin was set on top of the bureau and he ran his index finger along the outside curve.

"You can pick it up if you want," I said.

"No."

He walked over to my window and looked out over the slate and thatched roof houses.

"Why didn't my mother go to Blenheim today?"

"She did."

"No, she didn't."

"I saw her off myself," I said.

"Well, I saw her in Oxford walking down the street with some man."

Rupert stood with his back to me. I felt a horrible tickle in my throat, something way down inside. I wanted to ask him how she looked, what the man was like.

"What were you doing in Oxford this afternoon?" I asked.

"Lennie's mother gave us a ride in."

"How did you get back?"

"She brought me back to the Noke turn-off and I caught a ride at the Two Swans."

"Rupert, you shouldn't have. Something might have happened."

"Who was my mother with this afternoon?"

"Rupy, I don't know." I stood up and beckoned him over. He walked toward me reluctantly. He was at the age of being small enough to be held, but embarrassed by obvious affection. I

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hugged him and talked into his hair. I was afraid to look him in the face.

"She might have been talking with one of the officers or trustees about business there."

"Tour guides don't do that," he said.

"Maybe she's getting promoted."

He stiffened and pulled away from me. Then he walked out of my room and gently closed the door behind him.

After that day, I began to notice little things—that Charlotte rarely talked about her job when David wasn't home, her disproportionate impatience when Cary wanted to answer the phone herself. I wondered about every phone call that Charlotte chose to take out of the room, and what grew to disturb me, even more than the possibility that she might have a lover, was the fact that she hadn't told me.

Early one afternoon when I was going upstairs to practice, Charlotte stopped me on the landing and said she was going to visit her brother Graham in London for the weekend. He was in town for a few days, and they needed some time to talk. She asked that if her parents called, please not to tell them she was seeing Graham. They'd be terribly hurt that he wasn't coming out to see them. I nodded and said it was fine, but later in my room I wondered if she was really seeing her brother. It seemed strange that he didn't want to see his parents.

I was quiet that evening as we were fixing dinner. Charlotte was subdued also.

"I hope you don't mind staying with the children all weekend. You can take a few days off next week if you like."

"No, it's no problem at all," I said.

Charlotte stopped what she was doing and came over to me. She looked directly at me and lowered her voice.

"It's a bit difficult about Graham and my parents. My brother is gay, and my parents have no idea at all. They always tease him about finding a wife, and he doesn't want to hear all that now. He has some things he wants to talk to me about."

Her voice was serious and confiding. I looked back at her face, those deep brown eyes and her pained half-smile. I wanted to believe her.

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On Saturday afternoon the phone rang. I heard the static, the space between crackles, and then I heard David's voice, small and distinct on the other end of the line. He asked for Charlotte.

I told him she wasn't there, and the frail connection spared me the effort of excuses. He left his number and said she should call back.

"Is everything all right?" I asked.

"Yes, everything's fine. But please ask Charlotte to call."

When I hung up the phone I felt something hard and dark in the pit of my stomach. I dialed the number Charlotte had left, but there was no answer. I tried it all afternoon, and finally, around supper-time, Charlotte answered the phone. Her "hello" was tentative.

"Charlotte, it's me. David called. He said everything's all right, but he wants you to call him."

"Did you tell him I was in London?" Her question was anxious.

"No, I just said you were out."

"Thank you," she sounded awkward, knowing her question revealed her anxiety. "I'll see you tomorrow evening. If David calls back and we've missed each other, please don't mention that I'm here."

When she returned the following evening, she said "thank you" and hugged me, then hurried out to the children. I stood in the kitchen door and watched the last of the long evening light. I reminded myself that she simply might not want David to know that she had left the children with me for the weekend. But it seemed that there was so much more. To ask her openly if she had been with someone else was not my place; I wanted her to tell me. I stood looking into the deep green and fading blue, and wondered if this was how everything happened, unspoken, below the surface.

After her return, Charlotte acted the same as always. The following week, her parents came to visit, so we didn't have time for our evening talks. I tried to create a small distance between us, to show that it didn't matter whether she told me or not, but she would take me aside and ask my opinion, or confide some

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small worry, and my coolness dissolved. One evening, we took a walk through the fields outside Barrington. We'd had a long weekend of entertaining. The sullen sky made the fields a deeper green, and dark birds landed on random stone walls and became a part of them. As we rounded back into the village, I said that I hadn't been inside the pub yet, referring to one of my predecessors. She laughed and suggested we stop for a drink.

The pub was dark and warm. We sat back on the upholstered banquette and allowed ourselves to be served. Charlotte ordered a Pernod, and intrigued by the cloudy concoction, I had one too. The licorice taste spun on my tongue, and I still associate the numbing sweetness with that night.

She talked about missing David, but over the past weeks, I found that David seemed more tangible in his absence than his presence. Charlotte regarded his reserve with a mixture of frustration and fascination, as if his restraint were a barrier only she could cross. As we talked about David, Charlotte's mind turned to Rupert. She worried that sending him away to school would instill this guardedness in him also. She talked about the friends they had made in Brazil, how much she loved their spontaneity. After her second drink, Charlotte started to tell a story. She stopped for a moment, as if to change directions, and then went on to tell me that she'd had an affair with a Brazilian diplomat while they were living in São Paulo.

"I don't know how it started, really." Her voice was low, almost monotone. She stretched her hands on the table in front of her and stared at them as if they weren't her own. "The men there are different. Everyone flirts. At first I didn't take him seriously." She looked off and squinted thoughtfully, as if trying to picture a room they had slept in, or trying to see his face. She bent to sip her drink and I stared at the tendon in her neck, imagined a dark finger touching her throat.

I waited for her to continue. Sitting in that darkened room, watching her, a whole world swam into focus. I felt as if I'd been handed a piece of red transparency, the kind that comes with a picture as a prize in a cereal box. When you look at the cardboard cartoon you see one picture, but looking through the colored plastic, a second picture is revealed.

"I never imagined myself doing such a thing—it seemed

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impossible, but I wondered if David really loved me, or if I just fit into his life the right way." She added water to our drinks and lit a cigarette. I watched the drinks turn a lighter shade of yellow. "Timing can be everything. You should know that for yourself." She looked at me, her brown eyes were dark. The lines around her mouth were sharp. "I didn't know what David would do if he found out I'd been unfaithful. I finally realized what I was jeopardizing—my family, my whole life. I was scared, and I broke it off."

Her words sounded sad and familiar, as if she had repeated them to herself many times. I wondered how it felt to carry her story, if it was something bright to be nurtured, or if she regretted the safer course her life had taken. She took a long pull on a cigarette. We sat quietly for a moment, as if mourning something.

"I don't know why I'm telling you this now." She watched a man throwing darts in the corner. I knew there was more; it pulsed in what was still unsaid. I waited for her to go on. Her green eyeliner had washed into a soft smudge below her eyes. I took my finger and wiped at a blot on her cheek. Charlotte reached over and squeezed my hand, then held it for a moment, as if to reassure me.

Charlotte thought a weekend in London would be fun for Rupert and a little break for us. She wanted to spend some time just with him. The girls could stay with her parents. She'd also promised him a leather jacket to cheer him up.

The following weekend, we went to stay in Graham's flat in Portobello. When we arrived on Friday night, Charlotte unpacked while Rupert and I looked at the autographed 8 x 10 glossies on the wall. Graham directed films, and spent most of his time in Los Angeles. I was impressed by all the stars I recognized. I followed Rupert into a small study and looked at Graham's books while Rupert fumbled around in the desk.

"You shouldn't go through people's things," I told him.

"He wouldn't care. This is what I was looking for." Rupert pulled a small hookah out of a drawer.

"What do you plan to do with that?" I asked. I knew Rupert had never gotten high by the way he had asked me about it when I first came to them.

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"What do you put in this?" he asked.

"Hash."

"What do you know about my uncle?" Rupert put the mouthpiece to his lips but did not blow or draw on it.

"That he's a director," I answered.

"My uncle has a boyfriend. No one will talk to me about it." Rupert placed the pipe back in the drawer and shut it.

On Saturday morning Charlotte was in the bathroom for a long time. When she came out, she apologized for holding us up and said that she didn't feel well, something she ate last night must have been bad.

I didn't give it any thought until she lingered in the bathroom again on Sunday morning. She emerged pale and quiet, saying she had been sick. Her eyes were red, she held her hands over her belly. I pictured her going to her job in a pretty dress, a bracelet sparkling on her wrist, anticipating, and the connection snapped into place before there were even words for it.

After that I waited. I thought she would tell me, that I would find her crying one afternoon, or that she would take me aside and tell me she needed my help. I couldn't guess what day she told him or what he might have said. I watched her for some sign of doubt or pain, but all I saw was a quiet moodiness, and once or twice a forced cheerfulness that suddenly turned too giddy, tinged with hysteria.

As I waited and there was no dramatic change, I began to wonder what would happen. There was no visible sign of her pregnancy. I wondered who he was. The man Rupert had seen her with? What if she ran off with him and nobody but me knew why? I imagined the police questioning me, asking if I knew any reason why she might have disappeared. David would return and press me about what I knew. The children would cry and ask me where their mother was and why she had left. I told myself that Charlotte would never leave her family, but every time I convinced myself, I read something in the newspaper about an ordinary citizen committing some unbelievable crime or unnatural act.

My routine had a different feel when I thought about what loomed below the surface. In the mornings I got up early and brought in the milk left at the kitchen door. I liked the thick

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glass bottles, the layer of cream on top. I thought how antiseptic Safeway's fluorescence seemed by comparison. I fixed toast with Marmite or Golden Syrup for Cary, then walked her along the narrow tarmac road, past the stone church and thatched-roof houses, to the grade school with its construction paper cutouts pasted in the windows.

One morning I returned to find Charlotte sitting in the kitchen, still in her bathrobe. She turned on the kettle, then turned it off without fixing anything. Her wrists looked fragile, her hair limp and darker, drained of its brightness. I wanted to make some gesture of sympathy. By now I understood that she didn't want me to know because it would somehow enlarge everything, make it worse. But I couldn't help it any longer.

"Charlotte, is there anything I can do?" I asked.

I knew I was treading over the line of what was supposed to be unspoken.

"No." She looked away from me. She sounded as if she was going to cry.

"I wish I could help."

"Help! How could you help?" She turned to me and her voice was furious. It echoed off the kitchen walls, into the hallways and rose up through the empty house. "What could you possibly do to help! I'm stuck with a husband who goes anywhere he wants, who leaves me in this barn of a house with no one but *children* for company."

Charlotte put her head in her hands and started to cry. I moved to touch her hair but she pushed me away. I knew then that I was not a friend or an equal. Her interest had all been flattery and need. When she looked up again, her face was flat and ugly with tears.

"You can't understand it. You can leave here. You have everything in front of you. I hate that. I just can't stand it." She got up quickly, pulled her wrapper around her, and ran out of the room.

I stayed in the kitchen for a few minutes, not knowing what to do. I wanted to cry myself, but I also felt a dark, clear space inside me that had not been there before. I went upstairs to practice, but I was too unnerved to concentrate. I sat by the window, holding my violin, and stared at the slate and thatched roofs of the village. Charlotte left before lunch without saying

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good-bye. I tried to practice again in the afternoon. Cary was with a friend, and Rupert was visiting the ponies with Helen. A little after three, I heard the crunch of gravel in the driveway and saw Charlotte's car pull in. From my window I saw a tall, slender man get out of the driver's side. He went around and helped Charlotte get out.

I met them in the entrance hall as he opened the front door. They stood close together, without touching. She must have told him about me because he quickly moved toward me, introduced himself.

"Mrs. Beresford fainted at work. I wanted to make sure she got home all right." He looked at me steadily, not knowing what I'd already guessed. I held his eyes for a long moment; they were brown with light glints in them, a shade lighter than hers.

"Poor Charlotte." I touched her on the arm, smiled to reassure her, then turned back to him. "Why don't you take her upstairs?"

"I do need to find a way to get back." He looked around the entrance hall, as if for a route of escape.

"I'll find a cab to take you where you need to go—it might take a little time, some of the drivers don't like to come all the way out here," I said. I wanted to give them some time.

Charlotte's eyes filled as I delivered this matter-of-fact lie. There was a sodden old cabbie who spent most of his day at the pub, waiting for the odd fare, and I knew it.

I went to the kitchen and put on the kettle. I called for a cab and told him to come in a half-hour. He came downstairs twenty minutes later and said he would wait for the cab at the end of the lane. He would have been handsome if he had not looked so upset. I wanted to keep him there for a moment, to hear him talk. I wanted to know what they had together. He was young, perhaps in his early thirties. There were circles under his eyes. He was anxious to get out of the house.

"Well, thank you for getting her back to us," I said.

"Oh, no trouble at all." He smiled nervously and let himself out the kitchen door.

I went upstairs to check on Charlotte. She was already asleep. In her fist she clenched a plastic orange vial, a prescription for a sedative, like a sleeping child holding a rattle. She curled up the same way Cary did.

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When the children arrived, noisy and hungry, I told them their mother had fainted at work. She was sleeping and I was making dinner myself. The menu was pancakes.

"Pancakes for dinner?" Cary was thrilled.

"Why are we having pancakes for dinner?" Rupert was already suspicious of odd good fortune.

"I don't know, I feel like it."

And I did. It was over. It had not been my waiting, and yet I had waited, and wondered, without the benefit of sure knowledge.

Charlotte slept through the night. When she woke late the next morning, I made her tea and toast with Golden Syrup as I did for Cary. When we were alone, she made no pretense about her condition, and she allowed herself to be cared for, a tacit apology for her outburst the day before.

Lying in bed that night, I thought how David would never know about her affair, or about the baby that had not been born. I thought about Charlotte, and how strange it was to be married to someone who did not know such a large thing about you. And then I felt afraid, because I knew that life was full of these things which matter so enormously and make us what we are—but remain unsaid because to voice them does not make them go away, and instead shakes everything around us apart.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Titian, Tanner, and the Remade SoHo

To Vasari, he was a man "as fortunate as any of his kind has ever been"—a painter of prodigious gifts, world-wide renown, wealth, and longevity. "A wise man of the world," Bernard Berenson called him, "who expressed nearly all of the Renaissance that could find expression in painting." And in Frank Jewett Mather's estimate he was in "his fervent and lucid spirit . . . his measured sensuousness . . . [an artist] nearer the Greeks than any other Italian painter."

The lucky soul thus referred to in these eulogies, Tiziano Vecellio, or Titian as we know him, was the subject last winter of a splendid exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. A slightly altered version of a show held at the Palazzo Ducale in Venice in the summer of 1990, this display of 50-odd works marked the five-hundredth anniversary of the painter's birth and—incredibly—was the first such retrospective since 1935. Clearly an event, and one that didn't disappoint.

Though a fair number of choice religious and mythological paintings were included in the exhibition, including an amazing installation of works from the ceiling of the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista in Venice, it is probably Titian's portraits that continue to speak most meaningfully to modern viewers. With these likenesses, a signal development in Western life reached an early peak. Man himself takes center stage, still engaged (ostensibly) in doing God's work on earth, but more at home now in his sense of his own potential and in his enjoyment of his own creations, at ease in a world of physical pleasure and consolidating power. The portrait of Doge Andrea Gritti, to name a prominent example, was an occasion for some virtuoso brushwork in the weave of his cloak and its decorative balls, in the band of his hat and the prominence of his white beard, but it also conveys a probing, believable impression of confidence and stature; that Gritti's reign in Venice was long and illustrious is no surprise. In contrast, the portrait of Doge Francesco Venier focuses our attention on a face—despite the deceptive inclusion of a view from the window or an expanse of curtain on the opposite side of the picture—that in its leanness, its protruding veins, and uncertain eyes suggests the weight of authority on those who lacked the requisite health and strength. The post-medieval world according to Titian

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belongs to the exuberant, to men of both intellect and appetite. Some of these dynamic individuals were frighteningly cunning, like Pope Paul III Farnese (small wonder that Titian's picture of the Pontiff and his two nephews is considered one of the great historical documents of the age), while others, like the Uffizi's Francesco Maria della Rovere surrounded by the insignia of generalship, appear to be proudly straightforward or, like Benedetto Varchi, models of dignity and scholarly assurance. All of the artist's sitters seem to have in common an acceptance of their right to sensual satisfaction. Whether it's in the vastness of Pietro Aretino's robe, the ringed fingers of Federico Gonzaga running through his dog's thick coat, or the coins and objets d'art in front of the wily Jacopo Strada, the same inference is served.

The National Gallery show ended quietly, with the self-portrait from the Prado, presumably painted when Titian was in his mid-seventies. The artist known for his ability to render on canvas the sumptuousness of colorful attire and the intricate folds of collars, sleeves, and robes dressed himself for this profile image in black with a simple cap of the same color. A discreet chain is draped about his neck, a thin line of lace appears above his collar, and a paintbrush, easy to overlook, rests in the artist's hand at the lower left corner of the picture. A reflection of humility rather than the grand egoism he would have been entitled to project, a gently brush-stroked combination of black, brown, gray, and white, the Prado *Self-Portrait* is a soft-spoken meditation on a full life and its imminent end.

As the new fin de siècle approaches, there is a timeliness to an exhibition like the Titian, in two respects. We live in a period in which the idea of the artist as a heroic figure, the archetype of the individual genius creating great works of force and originality, is held in some disrepute. There are plausible reasons for this view, having to do with current thinking about Eurocentrism and white male canons and pomposity and so on, though it often feels as if the baby is being thrown out with the bathwater here. We also live in a time in which art as a sensual experience, an unabashed feast for the eyes, has lost out to the belief that higher conceptual, political, and historical goals must be served. There are plausible reasons for this temporary development, too. But here is where it all began, more or less: with Tiziano Vecellio, an indisputably exceptional being, giving the world what it had never seen before, images of man as defined in the ensuing years by Shakespeare, Erasmus, More, and Machiavelli.

Two other shows in Washington at the same time were a mistake to visit after seeing the Titians, but they are worth mentioning for the diverse definitions of art that they represent. At the National Museum of Women in the Arts, that citadel of minor art, the American Impressionist Lilla Cabot Perry (1848-1933) was given a full-scale retrospective. The show included nice enough portraits of Edwin Arlington Robinson and William Dean Howells from the Colby College collection, but on the whole Perry's pictures define the words

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"genteel" and "academic." Why this strange museum insists on specializing in little-known, second-rate talents, instead of giving space to some important and more dynamic contemporary women artists, is anybody's guess, but the die has probably already been cast at founder Wilhemina Holladay's white elephant on New York Avenue. Back on the Mall at the Hirshhorn, the John Baldessari retrospective was a polar-opposite experience. Baldessari has been a pioneering force in American Conceptualism over the last thirty years, a rigorous believer in art-as-idea and one of the most influential renouncers of the paint-on-canvas medium and the whole approach to art as a studio-based aesthetic pursuit. The only thing I have against Baldessari, who specializes in reworked photographs, composite pictures, and documentation of his various conceptual projects, is that what I saw at the Hirshhorn could have been assimilated just as easily by way of the catalogue texts and reproductions.

My mood as I left Washington that day was testy, rooted in the thought that if museum-going were ever restricted to the likes of Perry's visual bonbons and Baldessari's anti-visual idea pieces, I'd just as soon spend more time at the movies. Between the humble craftsmen and the intellectual innovators, what makes looking at art so much fun often gets lost along the way.

Henry Ossawa Tanner is not exactly a household name, nor even a major name in African-American Studies. The reason for this has less to do with racial discrimination or historical blindness than with the fact that he wasn't a very inspiring painter. Certainly there are commendable aspects to a few of his works, but it's inconceivable that the Philadelphia Museum of Art would have given Tanner a retrospective of this kind had it not been for the color of his skin. The relevant comparisons in American art have to do with Abbott Thayer or Gari Melchers, not Thomas Eakins or Winslow Homer.

Born to a cultured, middle-class family in Philadelphia in 1859 (his mother had been a slave, but his father's family had been free since 1800), Tanner was a precocious young man, and some of his small marine paintings—done when he was sixteen or seventeen—are promising, lively works. In fact, even overly busy pictures like *Harbor Scene* (1876) make one wish that Tanner had devoted himself more exclusively to landscape and sea imagery. Aligned more with the spirit of the American Luminists or the European Impressionists, he might have achieved the worthy, solid stature of a George Inness. But, as a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts under Eakins and Thomas Hovenden, Tanner was subject to other influences and, during a long expatriate life in France, he seems to have been more comfortable with a vaguely poetic realism than with anything Monet or Bonnard or Cézanne were up to. For an intelligent man who died in Paris in 1937, Tanner gives strangely little evidence of any familiarity with the more adventurous artistic currents of his time.

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What was on view in Philadelphia (and will travel to Detroit, San Francisco, and Atlanta) were 85 paintings and 20 drawings of a depressingly tepid nature. *Horse and Two Dogs in a Landscape* (1891), for instance, registers the Victorians' love of cozy animal pictures, but is executed with no flair in the brushwork and a downright dopey composition. (A puppy is perched on a tree stump with a horse and dog in partial profile on each side.) *The Bagpipe Lesson* of the same period is pure Gari Melchers: a happy scene, happy colors, decent technique, a cloying sentiment. Tanner's portrait of Booker T. Washington or his 1897 portrait of his mother, an explicit nod in Whistler's direction, are more evocative, as is his one Florida landscape of 1894—a wonderfully-textured, authentically-felt plein-air image. But the later, abundant "Orientalist" and religious pictures, often spoken of as Tanner's greatest achievements, were for me among the most disappointing aspects of this earnest show. There's a lack of solid modeling of the figures or inventiveness to the compositions, even a lack of honest feeling to most of them. Nor do heightened color effects, especially an oppressively delicate blue in several paintings or the glaring yellow in *The Annunciation* (1898), salvage the situation. This is tired, late nineteenth-century realism straining to be moody and symbolic. No amount of palette-knife work, no amount of layering and glazing, can make paintings like *Christ Learning to Read*, *The Three Marys*, or *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus* more dynamic and plausible, less anemic, than they are.

The real issue in Philadelphia, obviously, had to do with affirmative action, a valid approach to the construction industry but a terrible practice in art. I can't imagine any professional African-American painter who would want to be included in an exhibition with that as its underlying premise. Better to approach the matter with the idea that talented minority artists have been overlooked and are indeed out there—as are unknown white male artists of talent. So we should all look more, read more, open ourselves to wider, less obvious possibilities. By all means, broaden the canon. But if the nineteenth century doesn't offer the right men and women for that purpose, forget it. The wrongs of the past aren't corrected by pretending that mediocre art is good art. If the Philadelphia Museum wanted to merge its aesthetic judgments with some subtle political sensitivity, its special-exhibition galleries would have been put to better use by a survey of modern American sculpture or postwar American abstraction—a show which, properly curated, would necessarily include some first-rate African-American artists.

Every year throughout the 1980s the experience of wandering the streets of SoHo in the hope of encountering worthwhile new art became slightly more depressing and slightly less fruitful. It wasn't only that the proportion of good work to bad was so slim—that imbalance had probably always been the norm. The Madison Avenue galleries of forty years ago weren't showing one Franz Kline or Louise

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Bourgeois after another; they were, by and large, exhibiting the safe bets of their day. No, the tedium a visit to SoHo often induced was connected more to the change in atmosphere, the frantic investment fever and half-cocked art adulation, that overcame New York. The result was that, by the mid-1980s, "south of Houston Street" meant boutiques and chic eateries as much as it meant serious galleries, and in the elevators of the Broadway-Prince Street buildings one was more likely to run into art consultants and their overdressed clients than one's impoverished peers. Worst of all, the galleries were only too happy to adjust to the new style.

No surprise, then, that it isn't in the big-name galleries that we are apt to find much worth looking at. Ilena Sonnabend, having established a cutting-edge reputation for herself thirty years ago, plays follow-the-leader better than any of them and makes a fortune for the world-weary Peter Halley, painter of day-glow grids and circuits, and those pretenders to the throne of Duchamp, Meyer Vaisman and Jeff Koons. Of course, Ms. Sonnabend isn't alone in her approach. Consider the much-touted survey of the eighties at Tony Shafrazi's sumptuous new quarters on Prince Street. (If the name Shafrazi rings a small bell from an earlier time, you might recollect the 1974 vandalism incident at MoMA involving the spray-painting of *Guernica*. Yes, that was Tony in his wild-oats period, but who in the art world holds a grudge?) There we were treated to the predictable hip roster of David Salle, Julian Schnabel, Barbara Kruger, and their friends. Or, a block away on West Broadway, at Mary Boone's sanctum, think of the limbo that Eric Fischl's career has lost itself in. A talented painter whose earlier work was animated by personal demons and a bitter wit is now touring the Third World in search of new material. Fischl's 1990 paintings from his trip to India are made up of affectless local characters, stagey compositions, beguiling brushstrokes, and an achingly hollow center.

Vitality, formal control, and a sense of purpose aren't unheard of these days; they're just more often found a little to the side of the fast track. Deborah Butterfield's horses at the Edward Thorp Gallery and Ellen Phelan's abstract landscapes at Barbara Toll Fine Arts are examples as good as any from the past season.

Butterfield seems to me one of the most talented sculptors at work today, though to mention her subject matter to anyone unfamiliar with her art is to invite a deep groan. Horses? In 1991? Well, yes, horses—but not what you think. We aren't talking coffee-table adornments or *National Velvet* illustrations here; we're talking something deeper and more complicated. In her materials, Butterfield is closer to John Chamberlain, the sculptor of metal wreckage and car parts, and, maybe, Peter Shaffer's *Equus* in her sense of man's psychic ties to this incredible animal. What a Butterfield exhibition at the Thorp Gallery presents are seven or eight life-size creations, their torsos exposed, standing or kneeling or stretched on the floor, sculpted out of rusted, scratched, paint-scarred metal scraps, panels, and bars. We look at fragments of an

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animal—whole chunks of the body or head might be missing—but with enough substance, and with a sure enough outline (often the contour of the horse is defined by a twisted bar of rusted iron), to make it appear as if a quick, exuberant sketch of a horse, rather than a detailed painting, had been made three-dimensional.

The fascination these unusual sculptures provide is a function of both technique and aura. With each show Butterfield seems to become more and more skillful, even bravura, at the effects she achieves, and the tension between her materials—industrial rubbish, the detritus of a civilization going to pot—and the elegance of the forms themselves never diminishes. Even more importantly, Butterfield's sculptures reward long and hard looking in that her concern is not so much a representational one as an evocation of the spirit of purposeful energy or repose, dignity or exhaustion, serenity or instinct, that these animals suggest: states of mind and body that post-industrial society no longer acknowledges or for which this society no longer offers metaphorical renderings.

Ellen Phelan's work lives on the edge as much as Butterfield's, but in a different way. Phelan thinks of herself as a realist yet has a huge body of capable work from the 1970s and early '80s that is definitively conceptual and abstract, a fact that tells us she has been exploring the definitions and limits of style-classifications in a critical way. Indeed, two of her most successful exhibitions of the last decade were ostensibly very different: a show of her small doll drawings at the Whitney three years ago and her large abstract landscapes displayed at her SoHo gallery and in several museum group shows. The latter not only thrived in that gray area between nature-evocation and abstraction, in the buoyant manner of Joan Mitchell, but brought in the issues of appropriation from art history and the Modernist insistence on an awareness of a painting's objectness. Many of these paintings were abstractions of famous Corot or Millet works and made use of a cut in the canvas, the edges of which were neatly sewn back, as a key element of the composition.

At the moment there's a kind of subdued restlessness to Phelan's work, a condition very apparent at her last show at Barbara Toll's gallery, which I find appealing. Experimentation, rather than repetition, continues to be the order of the day. Some of the new paintings were framed in an exquisite dark wood, others weren't framed at all. A few were much more obviously depictions of a specific site—masses of thinly applied black paint identifiable as bushes and shrubs—and those were mostly the paintings made with an absence of the striking color Phelan's worked in before, giving them an air of a shadowy recollection, a dream image, even an aging photograph. But several of the paintings were as abstract and well-crafted as Pat Steir's waterfall series recently seen at the Robert Miller Gallery: drips of yellow and green, areas of light and dark, waves and layers of pigment that might well be allusions to vistas in nature but are every bit as much about the materiality and allure of paint itself.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Ayckbourn in New York

THE PLAYS OF ALAN AYCKBOURN HAVE THE REPUTATION in New York of being box office poison. Fabulously successful in the rest of the world, whether in English or in translation (the Germans are especially fond of him), they have usually flopped here, when they have been done at all. One production was so bad that the audience ended up prompting the lead actor. We have thus managed to miss out on some of the most stimulating, unusual, and hilarious British plays of the past decade.

The first sign of possible change was a successful production a few seasons back of Ayckbourn's *Woman in Mind* at the Manhattan Theatre Club. A comedy about a woman slipping into schizophrenia (believe it or not!), it starred the droll and delightful Stockard Channing, who was largely responsible for its success. Besides, the Manhattan Theatre Club, and its artistic director Lynne Meadow, have long experience with contemporary British drama, knowing how to play the stylish, subtle, non-realistic material that most American actors and directors find incomprehensible.

Inspired by the fortunate outcome of *Woman in Mind*, two productions of Ayckbourn plays opened this past season in New York, *Taking Steps* and *Absent Friends*. These are early plays, dating from the seventies, which is unfortunate; most of his best work has been done in the past ten years, including *Chorus of Disapproval* and *A Small Family Business*,[1] comic masterpieces yet to be seen here. Nevertheless, *Taking Steps* and *Absent Friends* are so much better than most of what passes for playwriting in America these days that their productions could not have been more welcome.

Taking Steps is a farce dedicated to Ben Travers, whose plays at the Aldwych Theatre in London in the twenties were exemplars of farcical construction. A stock device in farce going back to ancient Roman theatre is the use of doors; the audience, knowing what is behind the doors, breathtakingly anticipates entrances and exits through them, which sometimes lead to comic confrontations and sometimes to hilarious near misses. Ayckbourn, writing for his own theatre in Scarborough in northern England, could not use doors because the stage is in the round. He therefore hit upon the device of having the action take place on three levels—the living room, bedroom, and attic—of a Victorian

[1] My reviews of the London productions are in the Winter 1987 and Winter 1988 issues of *The Hudson Review*.

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house, all of which are depicted simultaneously on the stage floor. Two sets of stairs are also depicted on the floor, with the actors going up and down in pantomime. Thus the entrances and exits and discoveries and near misses all take place with the actors in full view. There are also a lot of visual jokes, as when one of the characters, a dancer, prances across the stage in the "bedroom," while the other actors, who are of course actually right beside her, look upward to see the "living room" chandelier swaying. So masterful is Ayckbourn with his device that it is always perfectly clear where everyone is, even when there are characters on all three floors at once.

This obsession with the technicalities of playwriting is typical of Ayckbourn, whose plays include devices like a play within the play, or retelling the same story in three related plays in three parts of the same house, or the tossing of a coin to determine where the plot in a particular performance will go. Ayckbourn is as technically intricate as his contemporary, Tom Stoppard, if you stop to think about it—but you rarely do, because the devices are so clear and unforced. Furthermore, Stoppard writes about artists, intellectuals, and political leaders, while Ayckbourn typically focuses on very ordinary middle-class folk, who exhibit a "suburban blandness," as a character says of one of his unlikely heroes. Somehow, Ayckbourn manages to write funny plays about dull people.

In *Taking Steps*, the action revolves around Roland Crabbe, an arrogant, wealthy, alcoholic manufacturer of buckets, who is living in the Victorian house but cannot decide whether to buy it from the desperate owner, Leslie Bainbridge. Roland's marriage to Elizabeth, a dancer, is also in a state of limbo; as the play opens, she is about to leave him, only three and a half months after their wedding. Elizabeth's brother Mark is trying to console her, despite the fact that his own fiancée, Kitty, recently abandoned him at the altar, and has since been picked up by the police on a charge of soliciting. Thus, all the characters are in the process of "taking steps" in their lives, but are not really going anywhere, just as the stairs on the set do not really lead to other floors. Even Elizabeth winds up returning to her boorish husband, but, in a "bed trick" (as literary critics call it) worthy of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* or Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, ends up unwittingly making love to her husband's befuddled young lawyer, Tristram Watson.

Such trickery was typical of Ben Travers, as are the confusions arising from a ghost story (Tristram thinks Elizabeth is the ghost of a murdered prostitute), and from a suicide note that gets attributed to the wrong person. Beneath all the fun, however, there are darker themes that Ayckbourn will explore more fully in later plays: Roland's alcoholism is more than just a comic device, while his callousness and ruthlessness would be disturbing if we had time to stop and think about them. The two love relationships in the play—between Roland and Elizabeth, and Mark and his former fiancée, Kitty—are both

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disasters, while Kitty's suicide note is funny only because it is wrongly attributed to Roland. Furthermore, there is an underlying theme of non-communication: Tristram stammers, Elizabeth's good-bye note is illegible, Kitty's suicide note goes awry, Mark is such a boring speaker that he puts people asleep (including himself at one point!), and Roland repeatedly mixes up his clichés, correcting himself and then pompously correcting the correction. ("This is the real McKay. McCoy. Some people say McCoy, I say McKay.") Misunderstanding is a central technique of farce, but it can also be a comment on the deterioration of relationships in modern society. The characters in *Taking Steps* might as well be on different floors even when, like the actors, they are side by side. Lack of communication is one of the major themes of serious modern dramatists like Brecht, Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter, and as Pinter himself has remarked, Ayckbourn is an ultimately very serious playwright.

The New York production of *Taking Steps* was at the uptown Circle in the Square, which usually operates in a thrust configuration, but which was opened up nicely into a full arena, as at Scarborough. Such a configuration is none too popular with directors and designers; sightlines are a constant problem, and there is no façade with which to establish locale. Nevertheless, a stage fully in the round creates a marvelous feeling of intimacy between performers and audience when it is handled well, as it certainly was here. The clarity of the play was partly the result of director Alan Strachan's deft staging, and partly of James Morgan's ingenious set. The cast was a mixture of British and American actors, but they all seemed as English as cold toast and wet weather, and their acting was both precise and very funny. Particularly good were Christopher Benjamin (English) as Roland, and Spike McClure (American) as Tristram. Other recent mixed casts on Broadway have not been so felicitous; it was nice to see our own actors holding their ground with the more experienced and better trained Brits.

Absent Friends, written earlier than *Taking Steps*, is less intricately constructed, but darker in tone. The action revolves around an amiable young fellow named Colin, whose fiancée has recently drowned. Diane, wife of one of his old friends, Paul, has arranged a tea party so that they, along with two other old friends, John and Gordon, can console Colin. The irony is that Colin seems perfectly resigned to his loss, and that he sentimentalizes endlessly about his friends despite the fact that their marriages are all fiascoes. Paul, an inveterate philanderer, has had a back seat sexual encounter with Evelyn, John's bored, churlish wife. John knows about the affair, but is forced to keep quiet because he is dependent on Paul for business. Gordon, a hypochondriac, never even makes it to the tea party; he constantly demands his wife's attention by phone, however, recalling Tolstoy's remark that a family is a tyranny ruled by its sickest member. Colin consistently misinterprets his friends' problems, offering mawkish "solutions" that are comical by their very

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irrelevance. Because they see him as being in mourning, however, they can neither enlighten him, nor tell him to shut up.

Absent Friends, then, is once again about mutual misunderstandings that reflect non-communication at a deeper level. The comedy is somewhat predictable, but the satire on contemporary suburban life is deft, and the individual characters are each vividly drawn. The trouble with the play is that it does not go anywhere; there is a climax, of sorts, when Diane suffers an emotional breakdown in the second act, but it does not resolve any of the characters' conflicts or change any of their relationships. Colin, of course, sees the breakdown through rose-colored glasses, so that he ends as he began, happier by far with the idealized memories of his dead fiancée than his friends are with their living, breathing, repulsive spouses. It is an obvious irony, though not an ineffectual one.

The Manhattan Theatre Club production of *Absent Friends*, directed as usual by Lynne Meadow, was brisk, intelligent, and poignant. I particularly liked John Lee Beatty's set, a light, open, suburban living room whose spotlessness came to seem ominous. Placed at a graceful angle to the audience, it facilitated movement and meaningful groupings, and gave a good sense of being part of a larger whole. The offstage kitchen and upstairs bedroom are significant to the action; Beatty's setting led your imagination, via intriguing halls and stairways, to those important unseen locations.

As with *Taking Steps*, the cast of *Absent Friends* was a mixture of British and American actors. (There must be a lot of Americans performing in England these days, because Equity will only allow as many of their actors to work here as British Equity allows American actors to work there.) Brenda Blethyn, an actress I have seen many times on the London stage, was noteworthy as Diana, all chipper, neat, and efficient, desperately trying to maintain a façade with her nagging, supercilious husband, until her breakdown came like a sudden summer thunderstorm. Blethyn's face actually turned bright red as she raged about the unfairness of her life, starting with the frustration of her childhood dream of joining the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, a failure that seemed like original sin. When she finally dumped a pitcher of cream on her husband's stupid head, we all cheered.

The remainder of the cast, though all adequate, varied in quality. David Purdham as Paul was a perfect foil for Blethyn, handsome and charming (making his success with women comprehensible) yet, in a remarkably understated way, a despotic brute. Gillian Anderson, an American actress trained in England, was hilarious as the surly Evelyn, while John Curless as her cuckolded husband was delightfully athletic, swooping about the stage in imagined soccer games, his physical agitation covering up his emotional repression. Ellen Parker as Marge was less effective; her unseen husband never came to life for me in their many phone conversations, and she seemed too American. Her accent was accurate as regard to broadening the vowels and dropping the Rs, but did not get the pitch variation; English people toot up and down the

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scale, while Americans speak their mother tongue in a dead monotone that is usually a giveaway when they try to sound foreign. Peter Frechette as Colin had the same problem, and similarly was a bit too open, too aggressive, too emotional for a self-deluded Englishman.

Lost in Yonkers is the first Neil Simon play that I have ever really liked. He has never been popular among intellectuals, probably because he writes commercial comedies, but that has never bothered me; if he wrote as well as Alan Ayckbourn, or, say, Kaufman and Hart, I would be there laughing and applauding. As far as I am concerned, the trouble with Simon is that his plays are not nearly as slick or funny as they are cracked up to be. Everything is sacrificed to one-line or two-line verbal gags. Good comic playwrights don't write jokes; they create a comic world. Probably as a result of his early work for television, where he wrote for Sid Caesar, Phil Silvers, and Jackie Gleason, Simon cannot let a line go by without straining for a laugh, so that the characters, although strongly delineated, have no autonomy. There is a central incident in *California Suite*, for example, in which a woman finds a drunken prostitute sleeping in her husband's bed in his Hollywood hotel room. She is naturally devastated; they argue bitterly, recapitulating the whole history of their marriage. Desperately, the husband tries to put his arms around his wife, crying, "I love you, Millie." "Please," she replies. "Not in front of the hooker." The line gets a cheap laugh, but it is so inappropriate for the character and the situation that it stops the play dead.

In the past fifteen years, Simon has written a number of more serious works, including three autobiographical plays, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Biloxi Blues*, and *Broadway Bound*. These also have strong characters, and a few powerful scenes, but they peter out. Simon's weak sense of plot means that conflicts are undeveloped, and climactic scenes remain unwritten. *Broadway Bound*, for example, concerns two young brothers in the late 1940s trying to break into writing for radio; the inept results are hilarious, but we never get a scene where they do get the hang of it, even though we are to assume that the young narrator eventually succeeds (i.e., becomes Neil Simon). A subplot shows the marriage of the brothers' parents breaking up for no particular reason, an event that has only tenuous connections with the main plot. There is also a crusty old grandfather, a typical Simon character who does little except make offbeat remarks.

Lost in Yonkers is another loosely autobiographical play, based on Simon's youthful experiences of being shifted about with his brother from one set of relatives to another while their parents' marriage waxed and waned. Set in 1942, it has the boys' mother recently dead, and the father, deep in debt to loan sharks, forced to go on the road, buying and selling scrap iron in the South. He has no choice but to leave his sons in Yonkers with his tyrannical old mother, a German-Jewish immigrant who has terrorized all four of her children. Her other son has become a mobster; one of her daughters has a nervous

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mannerism that leaves her almost speechless, while the other, slightly retarded, still lives with her mother at the age of thirty-five, in a state of childlike, if occasionally rebellious, dependence. The grandmother herself is shown to be more than a foil; we hear of injuries she suffered as a child in Germany in an anti-Semitic incident, as result of which she continues to walk with a limp and suffer constant pain. Her steely disposition is thus not some arbitrary character flaw, but a strategy for dealing with a lifetime of deprivation and suffering. The word "steel" reverberates throughout the play, referring to the scrap metal that is going to win the war against the anti-Semitic Germans, the metaphoric steel in the grandmother's spine, and the "stealing" that is continually going on, of everything from ice cream to money to human affection.

The result of this well-crafted situation is a bevy of dramatic conflicts, and for once Simon focuses on them instead of on writing gags. The grandmother is in conflict with all of her children and grandchildren; the boys are in conflict with each other, and with their gangster uncle, who is a bit of a bully but also a source of worldly wisdom. Gradually, the focus of the play shifts to the boys' retarded aunt, who has been sneaking about with the usher of the local movie theatre, another retarded person, and hopes to marry him. The marriage does not come off, more because of the fellow's own weaknesses than from the aunt's lack of resolve, but her attempt to assert herself leads to a strong final confrontation with her mother, and terrible revelations about her past that she is finally conquering.

The aunt's assertiveness says as much about her relationship with the playwright as it does about her relationship with her mother. As originally presented in the first act, she is dopey but nice, full of naively comic remarks that give her charm. If she continued in that vein, she would have been like the grandfather in *Broadway Bound*, offbeat and amusing but ultimately undramatic, an ornament rather than an active agent. She seems, however, to have demanded an independent voice in Simon's imagination, with the result that she takes over the play, and turns it into a work of art. In giving his character autonomy, Simon has finally, in his twenty-seventh play, become a playwright.

The Broadway production of *Yonkers*, directed by the consummate Gene Saks, was flawless. Mercedes Ruehl as the aunt, and Irene Worth as the grandmother, deserve hands down to win Tony Awards for best actress and best supporting actress, and not just because there was so little competition this past season. The last time I saw Ruehl, she played the sophisticated lawyer in *Other People's Money*; now, in a role as far from that one as possible, she seemed naive but alert, slow-witted yet shrewd, intimidated yet strong, and, above all, warm and decent. Worth, a classical actress of considerable note, brought classical reserve and majesty to her role. The rest of the cast were also fine, especially Jamie Marsh as the older brother. It is tricky to play an adolescent (the actor is actually in his early twenties), but Marsh gave

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the role not just accuracy, but dignity and sensitivity. We have had several lean seasons in a row on Broadway, but this production, with a commercial playwright, a commercial director, and a cast of pros, showed that there is still hope for the old invalid.

At the other extreme, my anti-Tony Award for the most fatuous and pretentious play on Broadway went, as usual, to one associated with Andrew Lloyd Webber. It was not one of his usual extravaganzas, however; it was not even a musical, but an opulent period piece by David Hirson entitled *La Bête*. Co-produced by Webber and Stuart Ostrow, the play is set in France in 1654, and is written in rhymed couplets. It concerns Molière's theatre company, or one modeled on his; the title character is a ham actor and poetaster similar to Oronte in *The Misanthrope*, who wants Molière (anagrammatized to "Elomire") to produce one of his wretched plays, and who has the political clout, through his royal connections, to force him to do it.

In the first act, Valere, the beastly title character, has a manic twenty-minute monologue on the subject of his own genius, a speech that is as tedious to us as it is supposed to be to the other characters on stage. The couplets are modeled on the wonderful Richard Wilbur translation of *Misanthrope*, whose flexible rhythms and phrasings are counterpointed by rigid rhyming, to give an effect that is not particularly like the original, but which has its own special elegance and potency. In Hirson's inept hands, however, the couplets seem merely garish and stupid. In the second act, we get to see parts of Valere's play, *Two Boys from Cadiz*, which the Prince, out of a desire not to seem outmoded or philistine, decides must be performed. Since the play-within-the-play is no worse than the one that surrounds it, I thought that perhaps the Prince was not so foolish after all. It is as if the story of the Emperor's new clothes had everybody naked to begin with.

In sum, *La Bête* is the kind of highbrow pastiche that undergraduates used to do when I was a student, very arch and knowing, full of both literary and contemporary allusions (but little else), written in clunky verse. The difference is that Hirson got his sophomoric meanderings performed on Broadway to the tune of two million dollars. The production was unbelievably lavish, with a showy white setting and splashy costumes (including a fur train some thirty feet long for the Prince) by Richard Hudson, and a cast of fourteen. Michael Cumpsty, a good actor, struggled mightily with the thankless role of Elomire, which gave him little to do but react with horror. Valere was played by the plump, hoarse, oafish, talentless Tom McGowan; the role was originally cast with Ron Silver, but he was mercifully fired in out-of-town tryouts!

I don't know what to make of *La Bête*, which closed after a few weeks, except to note that the choice of plays to be produced on Broadway nowadays has to do with whim, "networking," and dumb luck, rather than artistic or even commercial considerations. If *La Bête* can make it, then so can any other play—except that most do not, including many that are better than this drivel.

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BERT CARDULLO

Lonely People, Living in the World

I KNOW OF NO MORE COMPELLING WAY TO EVOKE LONELINESS than to isolate the human figure within the frame, silent yet silently speaking both to itself and to the camera that implacably photographs its presence. Such a scene could not be maintained for long on the stage, where language is the primary means of communication and hence demands almost immediate utterance; in a painting or still photograph, only one moment from such a scene could be frozen in time; and in a novel or poem words would mediate between us and the loneliness of the character or narrator, between us and the company of the lonely. Only on film can we have it both ways, can we have the long silence that nonetheless speaks through glance and gesture at the same time as it titillates us with the knowledge that yes, in fact, the silence will eventually be broken by speech. Three recent films all take advantage of the unique capacity of the cinema to visualize human loneliness or loneness. And the first of these seems to take a certain ironic pleasure in the depiction of such loneliness in a country where the communal spirit purportedly reigns amidst a classless, egalitarian society, and whose most famous films—those by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovzhenko in the 1920s—celebrated the advent of the collective way of life.

The only reference to Communism in *Lonely Woman Seeks Life Companion*, Viacheslav Krishtofovich's first feature after a good deal of work in Russian television, is oblique, wryly mocking, and doesn't occur until halfway through the film, after which it is repeated once toward the end: three Young Pioneers, the Soviet equivalent of our Boy and Girl Scouts—membership in which is the prerequisite, however, for membership in the Young Communist League, which in turn is the prerequisite for membership in the Communist Party—come to cheer up Klavdia Petrovna, a forty-three-year-old seamstress in Kiev whose notices posted on five telephone poles about town, inviting the attention of single men, have attracted their attention instead. Klavdia is unmarried and lives alone; though attractive and somewhat cultured (she listens to classical music), she now does little more than shuttle between her place of work and her plain apartment, where she takes in additional sewing to make ends meet. She craves lasting male companionship instead of the fleeting kind she has had in the past (we get no psychological explanations why her relationships have never been anything but fleeting), and the best Communism has to offer is the childish solution of "sponsorship" by

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the Young Pioneers, who sing her well-meaning but finally hollow songs. Krishtofovich wisely doesn't beat us over the head with his point that Communism, like any other ideology, can't cure loneliness. Klavdia doesn't launch into a tirade against the State, in this scene or any others, and the camera mostly stays in the medium-to-full range, avoiding the emotional or tendentious punctuation of the close-up.

Klavdia does meet one man, and only one (another calls on her later, but she isn't home and her neighbor, Liza, grabs him, only to discover that he's a married man researching a book about lonely women!), but he's not exactly her type: Valentin Spiridonov, homeless, alcoholic, and unemployed, shows up at her door right after she returns from posting her notices on a dark, rainy night, and she reluctantly allows him to come in. He's an ex-circus aerialist (and Navy veteran) whose wife left him after an accident ended his career and he started hitting the booze; a small disability pension now takes care of his minimal material needs. Maybe it does, but that doesn't stop him from trying to rob Klavdia during their first meeting, in response to which she hits him over the head with an ironing board. Thus begins a shaky relationship that never really gets off the ground during its six months but that doesn't neatly end, either. Klavdia says she isn't attracted to the slight and scruffy Valentin (he replies, "Actually, you don't knock me out, either"!), she tries to get rid of him on more than one occasion, and they never so much as kiss (he spends the night once—on a cot in the kitchen); yet something happens between them, some connection is made, and it is to this connection that the film addresses itself. He has charm and glib persistence, she has strength and tacit sympathy, and in a different kind of film—an American romantic comedy, let's say—their different personalities and backgrounds would somehow become the basis for a happy, permanent union. But not here. Krishtofovich and his screenwriter, Viktor Merezhko, are interested in reality, not fantasy, in revealing the aching humanity of their characters, not in gratifying the plastic sentimentality of their audience.

To this end, their film is not tightly plotted, does not move relentlessly from complication to climax to resolution; the emphasis in *Lonely Woman* is more on how Klavdia and Valentin affect each other along the way, from one loosely connected episode to another, than on what they will do with each other at the conclusion. There isn't much of a plot to summarize, then, because the "plot" is contained in the interaction of the two characters—which takes place mainly in Klavdia's apartment and around her building—not in any external events of which they are a part. Other characters are introduced, but less for themselves than for what they contribute to our perceptions about Klavdia and Valentin, whom Krishtofovich, through his cameraman, Vasily Truskkovsky, is careful to unite in two-shot as much as he isolates each in his or her own frame through cutting. The most these two achieve in their relationship is a precarious balance, and the

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precariousness of that balance is visually mimicked by the regularity with which the camera switches from the intimacy of two-shot to the stichomythia of shot/reverse-shot. But it is the shots of Klavdia alone, silent, and delicately self-contained that I will remember most from this film, particularly the long take after she escorts the Young Pioneers from her apartment at the end of their first visit. She fibs to them that they need not worry, since she's getting married soon, then closes the door and stands awhile, in full shot, in relative darkness; when she finally moves, it is into complete darkness in the back of the frame, where we hear her methodically sweeping the floor. Even when Klavdia is in a room with another person, Krishtofovich sometimes suggests her habitual loneness or apartness. Twice during scenes with Valentin, for example, he remains stationary within the frame as she moves in and out of it, addressing him at the same time that she avoids him. And during her scenes with Liza—who plays and teaches cello, thus sharing Klavdia's love of (soothing, harmonious) music—it is Liza who has come looking for Klavdia, for her companionship, and it is Liza who does most of the talking.

The last time we see Klavdia, she is sitting alone in her apartment with tears in her eyes; Liza has just left to post her own notices about town inviting the attention of single men. We see Liza putting up some notices, then *Lonely Woman* closes on a long take of cars restlessly moving through the Kiev night—escaping, perhaps, to another city, as Klavdia has said she'd like to do, but nonetheless contributing by their very box-like nature to the continued isolation of their occupants from the wider company of the Russian people. Klavdia's loneliness, then, is symptomatic of the larger loneliness of life in modern urban, industrial society, and it's also symptomatic of a loneliness that, in spite of itself, cannot transcend the class boundaries that seem inevitably to erect themselves wherever human beings mass together. Though Klavdia does not do an educated person's work—at least from an American's (parochial) point of view—she is educated, even a bit refined. Valentin, by contrast, is the dregs of society, in the words of one of Klavdia's co-workers; he's "like a boil that has to be removed," her boss goes as far as to say. Klavdia is stung by these remarks because, if she does not love Valentin, she has helped him—with a new suit of clothes, with the occasional use of her apartment while she is at work—and thinks she may even save him. Besides, she doesn't mind his company even if she doesn't quite know what to do with it. But she allows the censure of her peers to influence her and she in turn uses censure to drive Valentin from her life, only to regret his departure after discussing him first with his only friend, Kasian, then with his ex-wife (who has since remarried). It's too late, however. The ne'er-do-well, as Klavdia labeled him, has disappeared back into the crowd, and she searches in vain for him among the men lined up outside the liquor stores of Kiev. She has lost, not a husband, not a lover, but the only real *companion* her life has had in some

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time—and accompany her life Valentin literally does, together with the tracking camera, when he walks her to work, then nearly disappears from the screen until she returns home to find him waiting around for her—and her tears at the end acknowledge that loss. Before leaving Klavdia's apartment for the last time, Valentin had said that all he wanted was a little understanding, a little commiseration; what Klavdia comes to realize, through her acquaintance with him, is that that's all she wanted, too. Not love, not sex, not status, but someone with whom she could share her existence.

Irina Kupchenko plays Klavdia with the knowledge that, in a film without large emotional climaxes, she must create interest through emotional *coloration*, through the suggestion of her desire and her despair, her compassion and her constraint. The "colors" in *Lonely Woman* are contributed more by her and her co-star, Alexander Zbruyev, than by the world that surrounds them, which, through underlighting (and an assist from unsunny Kiev), Vasily Truskkovsky is able to render drab indoors and pallid outdoors. Kupchenko came to prominence in Andrei Konchalovsky's adaptation of Turgenev's *A Nest of Gentry* (1969), where she played the girl with whom the unhappily married Fyodor Lavretsky falls unrequitedly in love. She may be best known outside the Soviet Union, however, for her role in Nikita Mikhalkov's *A Private Conversation* (1983), in which she was required to do the opposite of what she does in *Lonely Woman*: engage in a Strindbergian war of words with her ex-husband, the only other character in the film, who tries to make love to her again only to learn that she is about to remarry. Kupchenko is well complemented in *Lonely Woman* by Elena Solovei, who plays the cheery, somewhat daffy Liza, and who has herself been featured by Nikita Mikhalkov in his adaptations of Goncharov's *Oblomov* (1979) and Chekhov's *Platonov* (1977; the film title is *An Unfinished Piece for Player Piano*). I've never seen Alexander Zbruyev's work before, but I like what I saw here: the performance of a lonely man who manages to be at once proud and self-pitying, humorous and melancholy, gentle and feisty, open and closed off—in a word, complex. Surely in as intimate a film as this one, Viacheslav Krishtofovich did much to help his principal actors create such nuanced performances. All credit to him and his collaborators for making this haunting, understated work, and to *glasnost* for making it available to the West, perhaps even for making possible so honest an examination of troubled Soviet lives.

Unlike Klavdia, the main character of Danniel Danniel's first feature, *Egg* (which he wrote as well as directed),[1] is a solitary man who does not

[1] The Dutch are best known for their documentary filmmakers, among whom Joris Ivens, Bert Haanstra, and Herman van der Horst stand out. The feature-film industry did not gain a foothold in the Netherlands until the 1970s, when Paul Verhoeven began making the films (e.g., *Turkish Delight* [1973], *Keetje Tippel* [1975]) that would earn him a reputation as the leading Dutch director, and when Fons Rademakers, who had been

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seek but nonetheless gets a life companion. Johan is an innocent, retiring, quiet thirty-five-year-old who owns his own bakery in the tiny Dutch village of Kockengen and lives with his mother. His sole companions are his best friends and employees, the somewhat worldly Peter and the happily married Paul. These three do almost everything together (and in nearly the same clothing) yet somehow singly: make bread, pass time sitting on a bench and tossing pebbles in the village square (where promptly at 12:30 P.M. each day a bus stops to load and unload passengers and mail), socialize in the local pub, make bread . . . One day Paul declares that Johan needs a girl and responds in his name to a personal ad in the newspaper. A correspondence thus begins between one Eva Zonnebloem ("sunflower") of "Foreign Climes" (Northern Belgium, since Eva speaks Dutch?) and Johan the Baker, with Paul reading Eva's lyrical letters to Johan (in one of them she confesses, "I lie in bed and listen to the night. It makes me feel so lonely") and writing back to her in his boss's name as well as voice. Johan, you see, is illiterate, though this doesn't seem to bother him or anyone else in the village. He is thrilled to be receiving letters from Eva, a schoolteacher, and she is pleased that he answers them—so pleased that one day she arrives on the 12:30 bus with four suitcases and declares that she has come to marry her pen pal. So alarmed is Johan at this surprise intrusion into his secluded, idyllic world, this sudden crack in his fragile, protective shell, that he takes Eva to "the Baker's house" without identifying himself, then leaves her there after his mother comes to the door and hears Eva's marriage plans—twice: once as the camera pulls back from the scene like a shy child, and once as it remains in close-up on the woman of the house. Mother and Eva finally go inside, while Johan and friends go away.

Eva's arrival in Kockengen is announced by the oval intertitle "Eva's Arrival," and the scene at Mrs. Baker's front door is followed by the intertitle "What Next?". Six other oval titles are used during this fifty-eight-minute film, but, unlike the titles in silent films, they are superfluous: they either identify a location whose identity is obvious ("The Square"), vaguely mark the passage of time ("Another Day"), or describe what we can see for ourselves ("The Bus Comes and Goes"). Danniel seems to be using these titles, not to mock *Egg*'s "small" action and characters, but to communicate to us his comic awareness of his own film's "smallness," of its deliberately narrowed scope. The very title of his film announces both the circumscription and the fragility of its theme, and eggs appear throughout—either real eggs at Johan's bakery or in his mother's kitchen, or egg-shaped objects out-of-

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making movies since the late 1950s, came to the attention of an international audience with *Max Havelaar* (1976). (Rademakers' *The Assault* won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1986.) The younger generation of Dutch directors now includes Danniel Danniel in addition to Marleen Gorris, Orlow Seunke, George Sluizer, Ben Verbong, Franz Weisz, and Erik Van Zuylen.

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doors—to remind us of the small and delicate surface from which Danniel has chosen to draw his story. Kockengen is a village in which everyone knows, gets along with, and is similar to everyone else, and in which Eva Zonnebloem's arrival replaces the van der Kerk bitch's giving birth to three puppies as an event of major significance—that is, one that interrupts the sameness of each day.

Eva's interruption lasts more than a day, however: despite Mrs. Baker's reservations and Johan's timidity, she remains in Kockengen, first to await his return home—to a silent dinner ("We don't talk during dinner," declares Johan, and Danniel gives him visual support by cutting to the silent dinner tables of three or four other families!); and second to allow a romance slowly to blossom between them. Initially, they "speak" to each other only by writing letters in their heads (which we hear in voice-over), with Johan "writing" in one room and Eva in another. Soon they're actually talking, although neither ever says much (*no one* says much in this film); some time later they're even making love, for the first time in Johan's case. Eva is surprised at Johan's illiteracy but not surprised enough to reject him, and their relationship quietly proceeds amidst the nattering of the good citizens of Kockengen. One day, however, Johan tells Eva, "I'm glad you came," and escorts her to the bus stop in the village square; Peter follows shortly with her bags; then Paul shows up together with a number of villagers. In long shot the bus arrives, the bus departs, the bags stay, and Eva stays, sitting beside Johan on the bench where, in the past, he had always sat with Peter and Paul. They continue to sit silently as *Egg* ends and the credits roll through—you guessed it—an egg-shaped iris.

Paradoxically, Johan has broken out of his shell at the same time as he has remained within that shell—a shell that is only reinforced by his inability to read and write. He gets the girl in the end, but only after trying to give her up; he gains a life companion, although he has shown a willingness to go life more or less alone; he likes being with Eva, but he is afraid to leave his mother's nest—a nest from which Mrs. Baker was expelling Eva (by asking Peter to take her luggage to the village square) precisely at the moment that her son, after showing Eva his bakery, was telling her, "I'm glad you came," and walking her to the bus stop. Mrs. Baker had told Eva earlier that Johan "is thirty-five and really still a child"; out of her own urban loneliness, Eva is willing to accept that child on his terms, to live with his loneness, as it were, in the fairy-tale setting of Kockengen. She knows both that he could not depart this place with her and survive and that she could not return to the "real world" alone and survive. So she stays—along- side him, on the bench, where she tosses a pebble to signify her acceptance of the village's quiet, simple way of life (a life that Johan nourishes with his bread). Johan and Eva don't get up and they don't joyously embrace; they just sit, as if in preparation for a life in which merely being in the world in the presence of the other will prove satisfaction enough.

That silent or non-verbal satisfaction is augured by the large

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number of silent shots in the film, of one person, two persons, even three or more—shots whose silence, like that of *Lonely Woman Seeks Life Companion*, is usually modulated by a camera in the medium-to-full range instead of intensified by close-ups. Despite the letters through which Johan and Eva initially communicate, words seem less important in Kockengen then they do in the "outside world": this is one of the elements that give *Egg* a fairy-tale quality. And there is no evidence that the schoolteacher Eva will embark upon the task of teaching her illiterate companion to read and write (just think what Hollywood would have made of this aspect of their relationship); in this setting, it's more likely that she'll stop teaching school and (silently) be taught by Johan how to bake bread. In this setting, it never rains and there is no darkness except during one nighttime scene between Johan and Eva, and that scene looks out on a romantic, moonlit-blue sky. *Egg* is suffused with the warmth of the sun, but it is a sun whose warmth is tempered by the slight graininess of Erik van Empel's cinematography—that is, by the tendency of his images to consist of individual particles (of metallic silver) visibly clustered together rather than of a smooth or unified surface that effortlessly subsumes its component parts. Van Empel's cinematography is complemented by Michel Mulders' lilting, winsome, yet simultaneously quizzical music, played mostly on harp and guitar—music that contrasts with the wistful, melancholy accordion and flute that discreetly weave in and out of *Lonely Woman*. The comedy in *Egg* is itself of a different kind from that found in *Lonely Woman*: Krishtofovich's film is seriocomic, whereas Danniel's is droll. The one views audience humor as a wry form of self-protection against the arbitrariness and indignity of human existence, the other sees such humor as a playful, conciliatory response to the oddness and evanescence of the human condition—an oddness and evanescence that are perfectly captured by the affecting yet understated performances of Johan Leysen and Marijke Veugelers in the leads.

The Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki, for his part, sees humor as a black or mocking response both to the bleakness of human existence and to the way that this existence has been plotted in previous (mostly American) films. "Existence" for Kaurismäki in *Ariel*, as in the two films with which it forms a loose trilogy—*Shadows in Paradise* (1986) and *The Match Factory Girl* (1989), is limited to the down-and-dirty proletarian variety: no seamstresses or bakers here, but miners, maids, garbagemen, and assembly-line workers, all of them nonetheless lonely people seeking if not finding life companions, or finding if not seeking them. And more so than *Lonely Woman* and *Egg*, the trilogy plays on the conventions of movie romance, the sad as well as the happy kind. In *The Match Factory Girl*, for instance, the pregnant teenaged factory worker, deserted by her well-to-do lover, buys rat poison—only to use it on rats instead of herself!

Like his earlier films *Crime and Punishment* (1983) and *Hamlet Goes to*

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Business (1987)—the thirty-three-year-old Kaurismäki has made eight or nine features in the last ten years (all with screenplays by him), and it's reported that he and his older brother, Mika, also a director, are responsible for over a third of the output of the Finnish film industry—*Ariel* immediately refers us, not to studio movies, but to a major work of Western literature. But the reference is ironic, as it is in the two earlier films, since *Ariel* is not in the least about a character who resembles the airy, magical, liberating spirit of *The Tempest*, nor is it about any kind of Jerusalem (Ariel means "lion of God" in Hebrew and is a name applied to the Holy City in the Old Testament). Taisto Sasurinen (Tasi for short), the main character (played by Turo Pajala, who looks like Dan Aykroyd but whose acting is not nearly as "busy" as the American star's), has no religion, no relatives, and no work: the moment we see him, he loses his job as a miner in snowy, cheerless northern Finland. The mine has closed down and a middle-aged miner bemoans this fact, and his life, over a drink with Tasi in a nearby tavern. Then, after giving his young friend the keys to his car, the older man goes into the men's room and shoots himself to death. Tasi quickly opens the lavatory door, dispassionately observes the miner's body on the floor, and leaves to pick up his car, an old, white Cadillac convertible (in this weather!), which he plans to drive down to Helsinki. After he backs it out of its wooden shed, the structure collapses. Tasi motors on; just as he didn't stop for his co-worker, he doesn't stop for the shed: in Kaurismäki's darkly comic world, man and object become moral equivalents.

The night Tasi gets to Helsinki, he's beaten and robbed of his life savings by two thugs; the next morning he hires on as a day laborer at a warehouse in order to pay for his bed that evening at a flophouse. At work he finds a needed overcoat in the trash, only to be told that it belonged to a man who was run over by a forklift. Tasi doesn't complain—he just goes through the motions of his life, smoking one cigarette after another in the process. Even his entering into a relationship with Irmeli Pihlajas (Irmi for short) seems to be just another "motion": they meet as she's ticketing his car (Irmi is not only a meter maid but also a hotel maid, a meatcutter, and a night watchman at the Bank of Finland—a kind of proletarian *ad infinitum*, played with just the right mixture of feeling and numbness by Susanna Haavisto), they have dinner (we see only the unappetizing food on their table during this scene), they matter-of-factly go to bed, he smokes. When Irmi tells Tasi that she's divorced and has a son, he replies that he'd rather marry into a ready-made family than raise one of his own; when she asks if he'll disappear in the morning, Tasi answers without a touch of irony *or* emotion, "No, we'll be together forever." And so they will be, even though we get a scare in the morning when the eleven-year-old boy, Riku, shoves a Luger in his face after Irmi has left for one of her jobs. The gun doesn't work, Riku declares; then without missing a beat, he offers Tasi breakfast.

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The same day, after unsuccessfully looking for work at a number of businesses, Tasi retreats to a café where he watches *High Sierra* on television. Unlike Humphrey Bogart, however, he is no ex-con planning one last heist before he goes straight. Tasi *is* straight, yet he goes to prison all the same, for what appears to the authorities to be attempted robbery but is really his attempt to recover his life savings from one of the men who mugged him, whom he accidentally spots on the street one day. The sentence: a year and eleven months (two years in any other film!). Together with his cellmate, Mikkonen—a bespectacled, unassuming (and sedated) man in his late thirties who is serving an eight-year sentence for manslaughter—Tasi quickly plots an escape, which Irmi makes possible by concealing a file in a cake she has baked for him. No sooner have they married (even marriage places an obstacle in Tasi's path, since he needs two witnesses and has only one) than the police are on his trail and he and Mikkonen are planning a heist so that they can afford passports and passage out of the country. The heist succeeds but confederates betray them, mortally wounding Mikkonen and in turn being killed by Tasi, who has to load his gun before firing, since he had deliberately unloaded it before committing armed robbery. He buries his friend at the local dump, as requested (!), then he, Irmi, and Riku drive to the docks with all the loot. As they row out near dawn to meet their ship, which will take them to Mexico, the camera pans gently to their left until the ship's name, *Ariel*, comes into view, and a male voice sings "Over the Rainbow" in Finnish on the soundtrack.

Unlike the Bogie of *High Sierra*, Tasi has neither been shot to death for his crimes nor deprived of reunion with his moll. He gets to live and he gets to love, but his happiness and the happiness of *Ariel*'s ending are tempered by both the accidental quality of its narrative—by the way in which Tasi meanders out of rather than repudiates the life of a loner, as well as by the way in which he falls into rather than chooses even a life of crime—and the chilly darkness (a darkness become wanness during daylight scenes) of Timo Salminen's cinematography, not to speak of the fatuous optimism of Kaurismäki's playing "Over the Rainbow" over the final scene and naming the getaway ship *Ariel*. What lingers in the mind after a viewing of *Ariel*, in any event, is not the final image of Tasi, Irmi, and Riku looking up from their rowboat at the ship of their dreams, but the image of Tasi alone and exposed to the world, yet somehow also inured to it, as he drives down the open road in his white Cadillac, its top down (because he either doesn't think to put it up or doesn't know how to) and its radio blaring. When that top finally gets put up—by another loner, Mikkonen, just before he dies in the back seat—Tasi is sitting up front together with Irmi and Riku, his world now more secure, more ordered, but also more circumscribed and more insistent. It's as if his life were beginning anew, this time within the confines of the classical Hollywood cinema.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

The Exaggerator

On his second reading tour of America in 1867–68, Dickens met Emerson, and although the sage of Concord was later assured by Dickens' hosts that the novelist was a man of great cheerfulness and high spirits, Emerson demurred: "You see him quite wrong, evidently, and would persuade me that he is a genial creature, full of sweetness and amenities and superior to his talents, but I fear he is harnessed to them. He is too consummate an artist to have a thread of nature left. He daunts me! I have not the key." A brilliant observation, and by that time (Dickens was to die within three years) it's fair to say that his "nature" was extremely hard-pressed. Separated from his wife and physically exhausted by a vascular degeneration that manifested itself especially in a painfully swollen right foot, he had put everything into his role as great novelist and great entertainer. This is what Emerson saw clearly, even as he claimed to be daunted by Dickens.

The length and sweep of Peter Ackroyd's biography of the novelist suggests that whether or not he has "the key" to Dickens he is certainly undaunted by him.[1] Part of Mr. Ackroyd's confidence derives from his own identity as a novelist whose books deal boldly and extravagantly with, among other things, the topography and atmosphere of both London and provincial England. (*Hawksmoor*, 1985, and *Chatterton*, 1987, are notable in this regard.) And Dickens has been hanging around Ackroyd's imagination at least since his first novel, *The Great Fire of London* (1982), in which not only the Marshalsea Prison is represented—where Little Dorrit's and Dickens' fathers were imprisoned—but in which a character appears who is convinced she *is* Little Dorrit.

Ackroyd's boldness and extravagance can also be seen in his implicit claim that this is no ordinary biography by just another professional type. That claim is flamboyantly made by the inclusion of seven short interludes or interchapters marked off from the main narrative. These concern the process of writing biography: they subject both Dickens and his investigator to questions about the enterprise, and

[1] DICKENS, by *Peter Ackroyd*. HarperCollins. $35.00. The book is 1195 pages, 57 of which consist of "Notes on Text and Sources" where the biographer documents his narrative. (There are no footnotes, however.) Ackroyd has read all of Dickens through three times, as well as every book and article about his subject.

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they assemble literary figures about whom Ackroyd has written in previous books (Chatterton, Oscar Wilde, T.S. Eliot) to converse with Dickens on the state of things. I found these interludes both curious and intrusive, although they contain some revealing moments. In one of them Dickens asks Ackroyd how he (the biographer) can understand him (the novelist) when he, Dickens, doesn't even understand himself. Dickens proceeds to dismiss biographers as merely "novelists without imagination," while going on to admit that some of his best friends are biographers. In another interlude an italicized voice asks the Ackroyd figure why he decided to write on Dickens in the first place. The answer: "I don't know. It just seemed a good idea at the time." He might have added that the English publisher, Sinclair-Stevenson, offered him a contract for two biographies (Dickens to be followed by Blake) for the quite spectacular sum of £650,000—so the financial details are in line with the size of the project.

Ackroyd's main predecessors in academic biographies of Dickens are what we've grown used to referring to as the "standard" one by Edgar Johnson, a two-volume work published in 1952, and more recently a shorter treatment by Fred Kaplan in 1988. Johnson was never much fun to read, and he seems to have been unbothered by over-complex thoughts about his subject. He alternates discussion of the life, with "criticism" chapters in which the novels are commented on. The style is banal: "From the world of crowded evil *Nicholas Nickleby* escapes into the bright outer air again. But not entirely; it mingles the sunlight of *Pickwick* with the darkness of *Oliver*." So begins Johnson's commentary on *Nickleby*, and a page later he is telling us again that "*Nicholas Nickleby* thus fuses the inexhaustible laughter of *Pickwick* with the somber themes of *Oliver Twist*." There is not much reaching here for the mot juste. Fred Kaplan simply eschews discussion of the novels, except in the most limited way, and generally there is a cautious flatness to his treatment that does little for Dickens.

By contrast, Ackroyd takes time to deal with the novels and tales, often with satisfying perceptiveness, and his accounts (say) of *Nickleby* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* are those of a practiced novelist-critic and superior to what one usually encounters in biographies. Here he is on the question of whether *Bleak House* can be said to have inaugurated a "dark period" in Dickens' work:

> It is agreeable thus to mark off the stages of Dickens's progress, but it is hard to find any real evidence with which to do so. The development of a novelist can really best be understood not in terms of his "moods" or even of his "themes," but rather in the slow process of experimentation and self-education which changes the techniques of his prose. In that sense, the "darker" aspects of Dickens's novels are merely an aspect of their more assiduously unified structure. There are scenes in *The Pickwick Papers* and in *Oliver Twist* as dark as anything in *Bleak House*; what has changed is

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> the way in which he closely packs together all the aspects of his vision, thus excluding that free play and improvisation which we consider to be the "light" pitted against the "darkness" of his structural control.

Ackroyd continues to worry the point in a useful way. His discussions of Dickens' books don't make a fuss about how such and such is a symbol for this or that, nor does he attempt dubiously large formulations of what, in a particular novel, Dickens is "saying." Instead he demonstrates a sympathetic gift for imagining Dickens in the art of composing his works. The pages on *Pickwick Papers*, for example, emphasize the quickness and energy with which Dickens began it and his confident delight as he became caught up in his own inventions. The novelist gets Pickwick and his friends onto the coach to Rochester, then begins to see and hear Mr. Jingle, the tall thin man in a green coat who says things like "Terrible place—dangerous work—other day—five children—mother—tall lady, eating sandwiches—forgot the arch—crash—knock—children look round—mother's head off—sandwich in her hand—no mouth to put it in—head of a family off—shocking, shocking." Ackroyd notes that

> As he writes Dickens rarely pauses to correct; his handwriting is large and firm, springing from him with extraordinary ease. He has found his great subject, and it is not long before he has taken Mr Pickwick to a ball, installed him in the Bull Inn, Rochester, and begun to digress upon the characters and adventures of his companions. There is great humour and even joy in all this; it is the joy of the young Dickens able for the first time to write and invent upon a large scale. Of course he still retains some of the supercilious and ironic mannerisms of his journalistic work, and of course he almost at once incorporates the topical and trivial events of the day; but the important thing is that he is now beginning to enlarge himself, to expand everything he had previously, to find himself as a writer at just the appropriate time.

This seems to me the right note to catch the novelist, as it were, on the wing.

What is distinctly the wrong note and a recurrent blemish on this biography is a rhetorical habit, really two rhetorical habits, that occur so regularly it's hard to believe Ackroyd didn't exploit them deliberately (though it's also hard to see why he should have wanted to do so). The first is the rhetorical question, asked for purposes of insinuating a connection between life and fiction. If Dickens spent much of his childhood living in cramped quarters in Chatham and London with siblings, nurses, his parents, and his Aunt Fanny, then Ackroyd will nudge us: "And do we not hear also in this somewhat overcrowded house the echoes of all those people moving through small rooms,

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arguing, fighting, grieving, which play so large a part in his later novels?" If Dickens read Fielding and Smollett as a youth, then "And did he not hear in the syntax of these novels an echo of his father's own orotund voice?" From a passage in *Dombey and Son* where Walter Gay runs to seek the aid of Captain Cuttle, we are directed to Dickens' life: "Is it possible to see here the panorama of the young Dickens's own flight to seek the help of Christopher Huffam at the time of his father's bankruptcy?" Well, evidently Ackroyd saw the panorama there, so why doesn't he just declare it? There are countless more of these awkwardly conceived pleas for our assent to a connection the biographer has already made.

The other disfiguring rhetoric consists of sequences of terse, often one-word sentences, bulletins sent out in unconvincing imitation of the opening page of *Bleak House*. What did Dickens' imagination make of his experience as a small boy forced to work in the blacking warehouse? "Dampness. Ruin. Rottenness. Rats . . . Woodworm. The smell of decay." How about the London where his imagination most truly lived, the London he saw as a child? "Uncertainty. Poverty. Dirt. Squalor. Interconnectedness, the rich living beside the poor. Fog. Mist. Fever. Madness. A place of crime and punishment. Prisons. Executions." Sometimes the two tics come together, the better (supposedly) to create a strong effect. If in later years Dickens compared himself to an animal prowling behind bars, "Can we see something of his own memory in these accounts? But do we not also see in the agony which Dickens suffered some image of himself as the innocent victim?" Then, after a sentence, the bulletins begin flowing in again: "Anxiety. Solitude. Defilement. Despair. Blacking." At another point, apropos of *Bleak House*, we're asked "Can we see the head of John Dickens, monstrous as if in a Dali painting, looming over the streets of the metropolis as Dickens walks them? What else surfaces in *Bleak House*? Decrepitude. Weariness. *Anger* against the world." These are not just minor stylistic gaffes since they persistently get in the way of taking seriously some of Ackroyd's deeply and often justly perceived correspondences between the artist's life and work. After a certain number of "Do we not feel," and "Can we not say,"(s) I found myself automatically responding, no we don't and no I cannot. Both rhetorical habits give a kind of overheated, corny tone that is inappropriate to Ackroyd's intelligent, if total, immersion in his subject. Or maybe the immersion was so total that he couldn't help himself.

These practices aside, Ackroyd's major emphasis seems to me indisputable: that the most serious influence on Dickens' art was the theater as an "enchanted place"—"a kind of dream, in which all the restrictions and difficulties of conventional reality fell away." From the days when he and his school friends would put on little plays in the kitchen of a friend's house, to the final grueling performances of his works before delighted audiences, the theater was no less than

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everything to his imagination.[2] Indeed much of his "real life" became theater, often of a garish and lurid sort. One of the permanently valuable books on Dickens' art, John Carey's *The Violent Effigy* (1974), shows how that art transforms what Carey calls "the materials of horror" into something spirited and resilient, and Carey points out that it is "Riot, murder, savagery" and other disorderly acts and feelings that grip Dickens' imagination. Ackroyd provides much evidence of his obsession with death, with accounts of murders and murderers, and with the public executions he attended and revelled in (at one of them he encountered Thackeray, there so he could write an article on the event). Dickens regularly talked about his characters in provocatively violent ways: "Paul, I shall slaughter at the end of number five," he wrote his friend and first biographer, John Forster, referring to the famous death he was cooking up for little Paul Dombey; while at his public readings he repeatedly performed with relish Bill Sikes's murder of Nancy. One of his most striking theatrical displays came when he ascended Mt. Vesuvius (the account is in *Pictures from Italy*) and, stepping over the ice and the masses of ash and cinders, insisted on going still higher so he could stare into the heart of the volcano itself. Ackroyd describes him standing on the summit and swigging from a bottle of wine before descending: "His own extraordinary and impulsive energy sending him up to the brink of Vesuvius, his hair singed, his clothes burning" (he compares Dickens, relevantly, to Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, drinking scalding liquors and doing mad dances). This excessive aspect of Dickens (to put it mildly) seems to me to mock the efforts of those who would account for it by analyzing his childhood or his family situation or whatever. There simply is no accounting for it, just as there isn't for genius.

In one of his interpolations Ackroyd asks himself whether he "understands" Dickens, then answers that "At the time of the actual writing I certainly did. Immediately after the book was finished, I thought I did. Now I'm not so sure. Only the reader has the answer." Very clever, but that is exactly what the reader—this one anyway—did *not* have as he finished the long book. A hundred and some pages from its end, we find our hero separated from his wife Catherine, maintaining some sort of clandestine relationship with the actress Ellen Ternan (Ackroyd thinks it a sexless idealizing of the virgin-to-be-protected), and at work on the last, grim novel he completed, *Our Mutual Friend*. The biographer, aware that his subject "displayed more paradoxes than most," attempts to summarize a few of them by saying that Dickens was "impulsive and yet disciplined, restless and yet systematic, modest in manner but driven always by the need for preeminence. He was of genial disposition but he also possessed an inflexible and paramount will. He often maintained a cool or grave

[2] In one of his notes Ackroyd singles out for praise Robert Garis' *The Dickens Theater*, still the best book on how Dickens' theatrical art informs his novels.

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demeanour, even while hiding the 'savage' or 'wild animal' which he sometimes sensed within himself." And so on through a paragraph, at the end of which and with the paradoxes piled end to end, a reader would have to be bold indeed to claim that he now "understands" Dickens better. Like Ackroyd after completing the heroic labor, he is now not so sure.

At its wildest and most brilliant, Dickens' comedy displays a similar resistance to formulaic understanding, or to attempts to account for it by juxtaposing it with materials from his life. There is a marvelous scene (one of many) in *Martin Chuzzlewit* where the evil Jonas Chuzzlewit entertains Pecksniff's two daughters for dinner at his and his father, Anthony Chuzzlewit's, residence. At the table, after he crawls or creeps out of his office cubicle, is a relic named Old Chuffey who when taking his place attempts a bow to the ladies, then sits down without having succeeded in making it

> and breathing on his shrivelled hands to warm them, remained with his poor blue nose immovable about his plate, looking at nothing with eyes that saw nothing, and a face that meant nothing. Take him in that state, and he was the embodiment of nothing. Nothing else.

What is the tone or spirit in which that brilliant "Nothing else" is conceived? Jonas introduces the relic to the young ladies:

> "Our clerk," said Mr. Jonas, as host and master of the ceremonies: "Old Chuffey."
> "Is he deaf?" inquired one of the young ladies.
> "No, I don't know that he is. He an't deaf, is he, father?"
> "I never heard him say he was," replied the old man.
> "Blind?" inquired the young ladies.
> "N-no. I never understood that he was at all blind," said Jonas carelessly. "You don't consider him so, do you, father?"
> "Certainly not," replied Anthony.
> "What is he, then?"
> "Why, I'll tell you what he is," said Mr. Jonas, apart to the young ladies, "he's precious old, for one thing; and I an't best pleased with him for that, for I think my father must have caught it of him."

Jonas warns the Pecksniff girls that "He'll be very disagreeable, mind, . . . He always chokes when it an't broth," and when almost immediately Old Chuffey proceeds to choke on some tough mutton, Jonas is "infinitely amused, protesting that he had seldom seen him better company in all his life." As Santayana put it (in his essay in *Soliloquies in England*), Dickens' "pure comedy is scornful, merciless, devastating, holding no door open to anything beyond." Just as

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Dickens put it about Old Chuffey—"the embodiment of nothing. Nothing else."[3]

At one point in his narrative, Ackroyd, noting that the germ of the character Jo in *Bleak House* came from the testimony of a fourteen-year-old boy who swept mud and manure from London streets, says rather superiorly, "And there are still those who accuse Dickens of melodramatic exaggeration." This is a line similar to that taken by Santayana in an often quoted sentence: "When people say that Dickens exaggerates, it seems to me they can have no eyes and no ears." But Dickens *always* exaggerates, just as Shakespeare does, and if sometimes the exaggeration takes a melodramatic turn at other, more enlivening times, it takes a blackly comic one like the above scene from *Chuzzlewit.* Dickens couldn't even take a walk without exaggerating, since his steady pace was four and a half miles an hour and "it was quite common for him to walk twenty or even thirty miles at a stretch." After a quarrel with Catherine, not long before their separation, he couldn't sleep and at two o'clock in the morning got up and walked thirty miles from his London residence to his house in Gad's Hill. Ackroyd catches well the man's obsessed nature and how, in his last years, it exacted his toll:

> But he had to suffer the disadvantages of his gifts; his quick imaginative excitement and his loss of self-possession in the characters of his imagination were now the very qualities which unnerved him, saddened him, rendered him desperate. He saw too much: he *experienced* too much; he conjured up too readily images of decay and suffering. . . . All the characteristics that made him a great novelist were now directed against his own life.

Too much indeed, and it is that which Emerson saw and was daunted by.

Ackroyd speaks about how Dickens could never admit to being wrong, how he was "the good man," "the moral man" who *had* to be right. And with that went an inability, or a refusal, to "understand" himself except in "a half-exaggerated and half-whimsical manner, as if he too were a character from one of his own books." This I take to be no reproach to Dickens, since most of us can (or should) say the same thing about our own success in understanding ourselves—except that we haven't written the novels and invented the characters. What would be the possible terms with which to "understand" a man who concluded his final reading-performance with the following words: "Ladies and Gentlemen, it would be worse than idle—for it

[3] *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Pickwick Papers* show Dickens' "pure comedy" at its greatest. Recent rereading of those books convinces me it's a mistake to argue that the novelist improved in his later works, since these early ones are unsurpassable.

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would be hypocritical and unfeeling—if I were to disguise that I close this episode in my life with feelings of very considerable pain," then went on to speak of the fifteen years of readings, of the imminent appearance of what would be his unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, then in a faltering voice signed off with "but from these garish lights I vanish now for ever more, with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, and affectionate farewell":

> There was a brief hush in the audience followed by something very like a common sigh and then, as his son recalled, "a storm of cheering as I have never seen equalled in my life." His head was bowed and the tears were streaming down his face as he left the platform. But the cheering and applause would not stop; after several minutes he returned, faced his audience once again, raised his hands to his lips in a kiss, and then left the platform for the last time.

It was the last superb moment in the Dickens Theater, and by the time we reach it, on page 1067 of the biography, we're both moved and used up. "Dickens entered the theater of this world through the stage door," wrote Santayana, so it is fitting that what is virtually his final bow should have been made front and center.

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CARYL EMERSON

The Brothers, Complete

TO WHAT SHOULD A TRANSLATION BE TRUE? To the principle of literal word-by-word equivalence, to the "sound" of the original, perhaps to the effect of the original text on its initial audience? These questions are the stock in trade of literary translators—and while answers might vary, most practitioners of the art would agree that the primary responsibility of later generations and cultures toward a world-class work of literature is to ensure its survival. Dostoevsky has survived magnificently. But in what form and at what cost? This ambitious new translation of Dostoevsky's final and greatest novel goes far toward restoring the form and lowering the cost for English-language readers.[1] So distinctive is Dostoevsky as a writer, however, and so peculiar is the history of Dostoevsky in English, that any new version of *Karamazov* confronts real obstacles.

I

Dostoevsky presents a translator with several problems. First, he is among the most "prosaic" of prosewriters, with an outer ear well-tuned to the inefficiencies of spoken dialogue and an inner ear able to monitor long stretches of messy, meandering, yet somehow sense-laden processes of thought. All of these outer and inner voices are conveyed by a quasi-embodied narrator whose access to the story seems to wax and wane. Reproducing this aural fabric is an enormous task, for—contrary to popular wisdom—at high levels of excellence it is much more difficult to translate literary prose than poetry. The translator of poetry can work with lines, verses, stanzas and rhymes, but workers in prose have no such easily discernible translation units. Thus a paraphrase, in prose, of a poetic work is almost always considered *in*adequate, whereas a paraphrase of a prose text is often considered a good (that is, a readable) translation. As one student of the problem ably puts the matter, there is a "widespread erroneous notion that a novel is somehow a simpler structure than a poem and is consequently easier to translate. . . . It seems easier for the 'careless' prose translator to consider content as *separable* from form."[2]

[1] THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV, by *Fyodor Dostoevsky*. Trans. and annotated by *Richard Pevear* and *Larissa Volokhonsky*. North Point Press. $29.95.

[2] Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies* (London, 1980), pp. 109–110.

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A second problem with Dostoevsky in English, one that is both a bane and a blessing, is Constance Garnett. Between the 1890s and the 1930s this indefatigable Englishwoman translated seventy volumes of Russian literature, including thirteen volumes by Dostoevsky. At the time she had little competition, and apparently sought no serious critical feedback. Her industry, along with the elegance and intelligence of her prose versions, quickly established her as the authoritative norm for the sound and feel of Russian literature in English. Surveying this great cultural service, Kornei Chukovsky, dean of Soviet translation theorists, praised Garnett for her versions of Turgenev and Chekhov. But Garnett's Dostoevsky gave him pause. "In reading [*Notes from Underground*]," Chukovsky wrote, "who does not feel the convulsions, the nervous trembling of Dostoevsky's style? It is expressed in convulsions of syntax, in a frenzied and somehow piercing diction where malicious irony is mixed with sorrow and despair. But with Constance Garnett it becomes a safe blandscript: not a volcano, but a smooth lawn mowed in the English manner—which is to say a complete distortion of the original."[3]

Chukovsky overstates the case, but his verdict has some justice. (The "Garnett factor" is both exemplified and parodied, for example, in a 1974 farce by Christopher Durang and Albert Innaurato, *The Idiots Karamazov*—in which an aged Constance Garnett plays the crabby onstage narrator, interfering from her wheelchair in the lives of characters and, in her own befuddled syntax, imperiously mixing the Karamazov brothers with heroes from Turgenev's novels as well as Chekhov's plays.) To be sure, Garnett's Victorian sense of proportion and civilized reserve is better suited to the spirit of Turgenev and Chekhov—indeed, to the taste of any Western reader raised on Trollope and Austen—than to the "frenzied convulsions" of Dostoevsky. Precisely here must we attend to those hard questions about translation that prefaced this review. For Dostoevsky in the West has been surprisingly well served by the durable Garnett versions (revised and unrevised); some would argue, even too well served. Joseph Conrad is said to have preferred Garnett's Dostoevsky to the original Russian texts. Her success is part of a larger set of factors that cater to the American reader's preference for smoothness and readability, for easy domestication of foreign material. "Englishing" Dostoevsky, in short, is a more complex question than a single translator cornering the market.

Central to that question is the important, albeit invisible and utterly unsung, role of "translation culture" in America. The topic has

[3] *The Art of Translation: Kornei Chukovsky's A High Art*, trans. and ed. by Lauren G. Leighton (Knoxville, 1984), p. 221. *A High Art* had its start as a brief co-authored essay in 1919, and was continually revised and updated by Chukovsky in subsequent editions between 1941 and 1968.

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recently been addressed ably by the Slavic scholar Rachel May.[4] May reminds us that translations in this country are often published without credit to translators; once established they are hard to displace, and competition rarely works to weed out bad versions. According to May, if a receiving culture approaches a source culture with ignorance or suspicion (as English-speaking countries approached Russia in the nineteenth century), it will tend to favor translations for their information value alone, for "what they tell us about the way real Russians live and think." This leads, at times, to an unfortunate disregard for form and poetic qualities. What is more, in the Anglo-American context, foreign novels sell better if they sound maximally *un*foreign in translation, free from stylistic eccentricities. Even if the original text was designed to sound somewhat alien to its own native readership, then, translators are not encouraged to reflect that design.

This leads us to a third problem with Dostoevsky, one concerning the genres and times in which he worked. Throughout his life Dostoevsky was a High Romantic writer in the age of Realism. No wonder the austere Vladimir Nabokov, who read his native classics in Russian, wrote: "Dostoevski is not a great writer, but a rather mediocre one—with flashes of excellent humor, but, alas, with wastelands of literary platitudes in between . . . I am very eager to debunk Dostoevski."[5] Nabokov's polemics against the style of his great compatriot might sound scandalous today. But it was in fact a common position of reviewers in Dostoevsky's lifetime, who routinely called the novelist's overblown plots, diction and dialogues excessive and perverse.

Nabokov is only one pole of the Russian response to Dostoevsky, however. The other pole is the province of Nabokov's contemporary Mikhail Bakhtin, literary theorist and philosopher of language, whose 1929 book on Dostoevsky re-established that writer's reputation in Soviet literary scholarship.[6] Bakhtin considered Dostoevsky one of the world's greatest writers—not, to be sure, for his polished style or emotional restraint, but for the methods he devised to exploit what novels do best: develop the potential of words in dialogue. In analyzing Dostoevsky's prose stylistics, Bakhtin shows how the novelist skilfully interweaves "single-" and "double-voiced words," seemingly passive words that issue from the mouths of narrators as well as words that fight back, struggle, reverberate in the divided consciousnesses of

[4] Susan Rachel May, "Translating the Russian Narrator into English," Ph.D. diss. Stanford 1990, chapters One and Four. The revised manuscript, under the title *Translating the Boundaries: Narrative Voice, Style, and Structure in Russian Language Translation*, is currently in submission.

[5] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York, 1981), p. 98.

[6] This 1929 book is not yet in English, but a translation does exist of the expanded 1963 version: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, 1984).

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characters, and forever give rise to new dialogues. This multifaceted verbal surface, etched with repetitions and traces of echoed speech, is uncommonly difficult to reproduce in translation. Done right, no word is ever entirely lost (as indeed no word in active dialogue ever is); done wrong, the result is a dead layer of what sounds like clumsy and redundant writing.

But multi-voiced words and their "polyphonic" distribution in a text were not Dostoevsky's only achievements, according to Bakhtin. The novelist also perfected the concepts of the "voice-idea" (an idea that develops alongside, and inseparable from, a personality), of heroes who are pure self-consciousness, and of fictional characters whose futures are not initially divined by their author-creator but who constitute themselves, piece by piece, out of their own dialogues—at times surprising even their own author. That Dostoevsky attached these extraordinary personalities to banal or sensational plots mattered not at all to Bakhtin, who did not share Nabokov's fastidiousness. What Bakhtin valued in Dostoevsky was a special way of using language to release human potential, such that each character could communicate maximally with others and make their voices part of himself. In this process, no verbal layer could be short-circuited or shorn away. And as Rachel May notes in her study, Constance Garnett was not alone in calming this turbulence down, in "translating out the intrusive narrator." In general, English literary language tends to smooth out the colloquial speech markers in which Russian is so rich, those conversational binders and asides that account for so much of the unparaphrasable humor and delicacy in Dostoevsky's otherwise rather forbidding plots. However appetizing a "smooth lawn mowed in the English manner" might be to Anglophone audiences, it is not Dostoevsky's volcano. And thus the paradox: new versions of Dostoevsky are always needed, but that need is rarely felt.

II

For these and other reasons, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky acted bravely in undertaking a new translation for the American market, and North Point Press was bold to publish it. What are the strengths and drawbacks of this already much-acclaimed translation?

The first and greatest strength is the translators' realization that Dostoevsky had not one but many—a very great many—styles. Their clash and confrontation were an essential part of Dostoevsky's artistic plan. Mikhail Bakhtin wrote about this "polyphony" back in the 1920s, but only recently have scholars begun to appreciate Dostoevsky's professionalism in working with bad or substandard styles as well as with various levels of literary language. (The latest and best book on the topic, Robert Belknap's *The Genesis of "The Brothers Karamazov"* [Evanston, Illinois, 1990], contains one chapter entitled "Dostoevsky Read Enormously in Books and Periodicals Old and

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New, Russian and European, Good and Bad, Literary and Non-Literary," which documents the novelist's voracious and unsystematic appetite for every sort of printed word. His final novel was a culmination, and something of a raid, on this literacy accumulated over a lifetime.) Of course, if one feels—as Henry James and many lesser critics have felt—that Dostoevsky was not concerned with style, only with passion and a mass of powerful thoughts, then none of this matters. But if one assumes that many *Karamazov* characters, and its narrator as well, are designed to sound awkward, bookish, melodramatic, then *not* to smooth over or homogenize the text (however well that might serve the ideas) should be a priority in any translation. The present edition makes this roughness a very high priority indeed, and it includes helpful footnotes that explicate the most important hidden and overt quotations.

The promotional materials from North Point Press, as well as a number of recent reviews, have drawn attention to the multi-leveled stylistic achievement of this new translation by juxtaposing some of its solutions to equivalent solutions in existing English versions by Garnett, Magarshack, and MacAndrew. For the non-Russian reader, these comparisons are an eye- (or better an ear-) opener: their non-coincidence on the simplest matters is astonishing. The Russian reader who checks these and other key passages against the original is quickly persuaded that the new version is, on balance, a great improvement. But single paragraphs in contrasting columns cannot begin to communicate the distinctiveness of this translation. Throughout, the Pevear/Volokhonsky version is blunter and more angular; voices stand out from one another, sentence length and punctuation is respected, direct quotation is not reworked into indirect speech, stylistic levels are discrete. One unexpected benefit of this tough syntactical literalism is a deeper understanding of the "mentality of the underground" so central to Dostoevsky's art—an understanding brought about not only by ideas argued in the text but also, and often, by an *interaction of styles* alone. In the confrontation between Alyosha Karamazov and Captain Snigiryov, for example, or in the various duels between Ivan's nervous intellectual energy and Smerdyakov's smouldering, illiterate even-temperedness, even in the famous intra-self dialogues where the playful patter of the devil is punctuated by Ivan "grinning" or "snarling hatefully" (pp. 641–42), we are aware of such impermeable crusts on words, such world views of difference reflected in the most elementary verbal exchanges, that irrational acts of spite or desperation seem not at all irrational but in fact seem (for all their surface melodrama and delirium) indisputably sane. The other side of Bakhtin's insight, that all is dialogue, is the astonishing fact that people reach one another at all.

A second feature of the text as a whole, one that very strongly marks the voices of characters as well as narrator in Russian and is usually severely attenuated in translation, is its choppy, inefficient,

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somehow redundant texture. This final quality, the novelist's seeming "redundancy," is skilfully reflected in the Pevear/Volokhonsky version and the translators are right to take pride in it. For Dostoevsky was very calculating in his use of repetition. Although abundant, it is rarely the result of careless or lazy writing. Repetition and "variations on a theme" generate a network of interdependent words, lexical roots, ultimately human situations, whose echoes are the material out of which a given character continually and critically fashions a self. The best students of *Karamazov*—among them Robert Belknap and Robin Feuer Miller—have seen Dostoevsky's mastery of the leitmotif as a contribution to nineteenth-century research into the nature of cognition and memory.[7]

One oft-remarked example of this device is the recurrence of Dmitry Karamazov's "bow" to Katerina Ivanovna. Beginning in a monk's cell with the Elder Zosima's ambiguous prostration before Dmitry, the bow in its various contexts is a sign of respect, humility, humiliation and, oddly, arrogance. Repetitions of the Russian root *klan* or *klon* (bow or incline) fret the novel and must be flagged. In Book Three, ch. 5, Dmitry instructs Alyosha to tell Katerina that "he bows to her" (*"Velel vam* klan*iatsia"*); four chapters later, in the drunken heat of confrontation with his old father, Dmitry re-instructs Alyosha to go to Katerina and tell her: *"Velel* klan*iatsia i ras*klan*iatsia!"* Garnett renders this final double replay of the prefixed root disappointingly as "he sends his compliments and farewell"; Magarshack, "I told you to bid her good-bye . . . he bids her farewell"; MacAndrew, "give her my regards, and say farewell." Those equivalents are all possible, but careless. Pevear and Volokhonsky have found precisely the right repetition and English idiom (p. 140): "He says he bows to you, he bows to you, bows! Precisely that: 'He bows to you—and he bows out!'" As the publishers point out, this is not only repetition of the gesture but stylistically sensitive as well: the first phrase is formal, the second already tinged with irony, cruelty, disrespect.

Of the many dozen additional "linkages" often disregarded or discarded by other translators and observed in this new version, let me mention only three. Two are successful, the third is not. After Ivan Karamazov prepares the ground for his Grand Inquisitor tale by testing Alyosha's tolerance of injustice with anecdotes of child torture, he shouts: "I tell you, novice, that absurdities are all too necessary on earth. The world stands on absurdities, and without them perhaps nothing at all would happen. . . ." Several pages later he introduces his "poem" as "an absurd thing," and the identity of these two "absurdities" (*neleposti*) is obviously crucial to the meaning of Christ's victory over the Inquisitor. Garnett renders the first as "absurdity"

[7] See Robert L. Belknap, *The Genesis of* The Brothers Karamazov: *The Aesthetics, Ideology, and Psychology of Making a Text* (Evanston, 1990), ch. Five; and Robin Feuer Miller, *Worlds of* The Brothers Karamazov (Boston, 1991).

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and the second as "ridiculous," thus blurring the reference. In another example from the beginning of that same chapter ("Rebellion") Ivan remarks on the illogicality of loving one's neighbors: "In my opinion, it is precisely one's neighbors that one cannot possibly love. Perhaps if they weren't so nigh . . ." (p. 236). This play with "neigh-" and "nigh" nicely mirrors the Russian play on *blizhnikh* (those nearby) and *dal'nikh* (those distant), warning us afresh of the binariness of Ivan's mind and its verbal wit—both indispensable ingredients for brain fever.

In the opinion of this reviewer, there is also one highly *un*successful solution for an essential leitmotif in the novel. This is the single word that titles Part II, Book Four: *Nadryv* (the word also occurs in chapters 5 and 6 of the same Book: "*Nadryv* in the Drawing Room," "*Nadryv* in the Cottage"). Garnett renders *nadryv* as "laceration," Magarshack as "heartache," and Pevear/Volokhonsky as "strain." Both heartache and strain are unacceptable for local semantic reasons—the first for its sentimental overtones and the second for its ambiguity in English—but of greater structural importance is the fact that *nadryv*, from the Russian root *ryv*, "to rip," is not a tugging or a stretching but a tearing open. There is a sequence of tearings in the novel that dissociate and estrange, just as there is a sequence of bows that eventually bind people together. From Lise Khokhlakova's crushing of her hand in the door to Ilyusha Snigiryov's frantic biting of Alyosha's hand, *nadryv* means something much more physically violent than mere strain.

While noting drawbacks (of which this reviewer finds relatively few), mention could also be made of the decision to "neutralize" Russian gender markings on feminine last names. It's the old problem of *Anna Karenina* or *Anna Karenin*: proper names for women end in -a in Russian, and while this can cause an occasional double take at first (Tolstoy's wife is the Countess Tolstaya, for example), the system is not that difficult, and respecting it in translation avoids the gender hybrids that spring to some of our minds when we see "Mrs. Kalmykov" or "Katerina Osipovna Khokhlakov." As regards other conventions of Russian diminutives and direct address—so subtly felt by Dostoevsky—this new translation is admirably accurate: Grushenka is called "Agrafena Alexandrovna" under formal circumstances and the reader is expected to recognize her and to adjust; Dmitry, Dmitry Fyodorovich, Mitya, Mityenka are used on the same character throughout to various and calculated effect. In short, part of the purpose of a translation is to transmit a genuinely foreign social fabric intact, and literacy in naming practices is pretty easily acquired, even in the space of a single novel. Here, do it the Russians' way.

There is a final problem not of the translators' making that frequently attaches to world-class, multiply-translated works—what can only be called "reader's nostalgia" for earlier equivalents. Most of us, even American Slavists, read Garnett-Dostoevsky in high school, long before we dreamed of majoring in Russian. At some level her

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solutions persist and are retrofitted back into the original; her musty, well-crafted sentences seem to cry out their nineteenth-century credentials, even though our later absorption in the Russian texts has convinced us that Dostoevsky was portraying his own utterly contemporary, colloquial and feverish age. Here Pevear and Volokhonsky are refreshing, giving us some excellent new equivalents that ought to enter the canon of *Karamazov* images: for example, Snegiryov's "whiskbroom" beard (*mochalka*, rendered accurately but stiffly by Garnett as "wisp of tow"), or the famous *dityo* (baby or child) of Mitya's dream, weeping and reaching out its tiny fists. The latter word is a peasant variant on *ditya*, and Mitya likes it because "there's more pity in it." Garnett has "babe" (too rhetorical); Magarshack has "babby" (meaningless); Pevear/Volokhonsky give us "the wee one," just right.

The translation under review began when Larissa Volokhonsky, a native speaker of Russian, picked up the novel (an English version of *Karamazov*) that her husband Richard Pevear was reading. She glanced through it and said, "My God, this is terrible." Probably most retranslations begin intuitively this way: the sound of the original is in your ear, and there is this nagging feeling that the English version you have in hand muffles and cramps a beloved, speaking thing. But from that moment on, it is very hard work—and the translators of this novel come across as very self-confident.

"Our translation reflects a shift in understanding Dostoevsky as an artist," Pevear explained in an interview with North Point Press. "Aesthetically, he was not understood at the turn of the century . . . The older translations reflect misunderstandings; the translators would smooth out the writing, thinking, 'Oh, he means this . . . He's just being careless.' [But] he really was extremely careful." Pevear believes that a translator's first task must be to identify the "peculiarity" of Dostoevsky's departures from the norm. And then: "if you were going to deliberately make this mistake, how would you do it in English and in a way that is completely believable for English-speaking people and yet not drift away from the original?" Such "translator's drift" occurs, Pevear claims, "when the translator decides, 'Well, I know what that means and it means this.'" Drifting is dangerous, however, for "there are 20,000 ways to say anything, but the author wrote it only one way."

Did Pevear and Volokhonsky find this "one way"? Time, and the proper marketing, will tell. The translators of this new *Karamazov* were clearly aware of the resistance in the English-speaking world (on the part of both readers and publishers) to a new version of an old, familiar, apparently adequate translation. But they were right to take the project on.

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DEAN FLOWER

Not Waving but Drowning

ALMOST ALL OF JOHN BARTH'S NOVELS tend to be floating operas: exuberant, sprawling, relentlessly episodic, they cast off from the shores of the ordinary in search of fabulous adventure. Hundreds of characters crowd the deck, and they seethe—as Barth seethes—with plots and parodies, jokes and frauds, bawdiness, wit, learning, and ingenuity. Barth's entertainments are nothing if not extravagant. But they can also be tediously long. Critics tend to wonder, rightly, about their seaworthiness. Many a reader drowns in the ocean of story—or abandons ship—long before the voyage is done. Barth invented that nautical metaphor in his first book, *The Floating Opera* (1956), and has kept using it, in one guise or another, ever since. Each novel re-enacts his boyhood scheme of building a sailboat and escaping from the doldrums of home, dull old tidewater Maryland (as told in that first novel), taking a "night sea-journey," or—in the quickest read of Barth's more recent fiction—sailing away on a *Sabbatical* (1982). But Barth's appetite is for the big long book. He once claimed his ambition was to write a book so long its title could be printed across the binding, instead of vertically. He came near that with *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960, 750 pp.), *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966, 710 pp.), and *The Tidewater Tales* (1987, 665 pp.), and with *Letters* (1979, 772 pp.) he succeeded.

Now Barth has a new goal: nothing less than a revision of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Actually what he has written is much less, his own version of The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor.[1] He has long been fascinated by its famous framework: Scheherazade regaling King Shahryar with story after story to forestall her certain death. The interest for Barth, as he once phrased it, is "how to save and save again one's narrative neck?" His protagonist is a writer, a modern-day journalist named Simon William Behler from East Dorset, Maryland. He finds himself, inexplicably enough, trying to save his narrative neck in Sindbad the Sailor's fifteenth-century Baghdad. Or better say he has lost himself there, and seeks to reinvent if not recover his old identity by story-telling. Competing with Sin*d*bad (note Barth's correction), Behler the sailor becomes his host's antithesis and counterpart, "Sindbad the Still-Stranded." Each evening after Sindbad narrates one of his fabulous voyages, Behler must counter with an

[1] THE LAST VOYAGE OF SOMEBODY THE SAILOR, by *John Barth*. Little, Brown. $22.95.

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installment of his own homely autobiography. This proves to be tough going, first because Behler has never been that sure who he really is, and second because his medieval Arab audience simply doesn't believe him. Watches, airplanes, cars? Preposterous. Barth took this amusing idea from Poe's "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade."[2] He adds to it yet another motive: Behler may be able to save the reputation of Sindbad's daughter, Yasmin, and marry her too, if he invents the past part of his narrative well enough. Indeed, the reason to save his narrative neck is, just as it was for Scheherazade, love.

Behler's narrative "voyages"—especially the first four, carrying us halfway through the novel—are perhaps the best writing Barth has ever done. They form a deeply affecting "realistic" novel: the seven-year-old boy who carries on private conversations with a twin-sister who died when he was born; the fourteen-year-old kid who learned about sex and love, deceit and integrity, from a girl who knew which was which; the fifty-year-old father and husband, a bundle of false selves, who seems to find a soul mate and then loses her; finally the wandering sailor—"Somebody," as he calls himself—who can navigate expertly but doesn't know who or where he is, a realistic character in a fabulous realm. Behler's self-revelations are rich in anecdote, sensuous detail, believable voices, pathos—quite the opposite of Barth's customary *opera bouffe*, all artifice and fakery. Gradually the "realistic" narrative makes the reader care about the fabulous one, and understand why "Somebody" needs to story-tell his way out of his predicament.

I don't think Barth has ever managed such a balance before. After trying out an anguished persona in a modern setting (*The End of the Road*, 1958), he learned to conceal himself in lavish costumes, parodies, and high jinks. Now it is clear what a defensive and escapist strategy that was, and how deeply it determined his supposed "exuberance." Are all inveterate comedians like this? He was not waving but drowning. Behler in fact nearly drowns, or is cast away (like Sindbad) on every one of his voyages but the last. There is much more to discover in this complex novel—most notably, the exposure of Sindbad himself as one of the worst rascals who ever got glamorized in fiction. Admittedly there are doldrums in this 573-page voyage, passages of uninspired ingenuity and tiresome fun. But Barth's narrative voice has never been more resonant—crafty and eloquent and heartfelt—than this.

[2] Barth's interest in Dunyazade, Scheherazade's sister, also follows Poe; she tells her "Dunyazadiad" in *Chimera* (1971). But Barth's deeper obsession has long been with Scheherazade; see "Don't Count on It" in *The Friday Book* (1984), an essay which explains much of his new novel.

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Nobody drowns in Salman Rushdie's sea of stories.[3] But he and Barth had the same sources in mind, *The Arabian Nights* and Somadeva's eleventh-century *Katha Sarit Sagara* or "The Ocean of Streams of Story." Both novelists are interested in the powers of storytelling itself, in the tellers and listeners, their inspirations and appetites. But Rushdie has written a fable for children that adults may ponder. It's a rare example of a book whose dust-jacket tributes (by Lessing, Gordimer, Vargas Llosa, Greene, and Stephen King!) are absolutely trustworthy. The magic and charm of Rushdie's lingo will soon win you over, even if this is not *Midnight's Children* or *Shame*:

> "Eleven o'clock when his mother exited," she declared. "Now comes this problem of eleven minutes. Cause is located in his pussy-collar-jee." It took Rashid and Haroun a few moments to work out that she meant *psychology*. "Owing to pussy-collar-jeecal sadness," Miss Oneeta continued, "the young master is stuck fast on his eleven number and cannot get to twelve."

The young master is Haroun Khalifa, and his story-telling father is Rashid, a veritable "Ocean of Notions," the famous "Shah of Blah."[4] But Rashid's inspiration dries up (at eleven o'clock one morning) when his wife and son reject him. They ask in different ways, "What is the use of stories that aren't even true?" (It is difficult not to imagine Rushdie himself here, sorely beset by Muslim fanaticism these past few years, asking himself the same question: what use are stories indeed, if they get you murdered? But in fact the book contains no messages for Ayatollahs, no topical nudges. It is wiser and deeper than that.)

What the story is really about is the story. Haroun, blaming himself for his father's despair, undertakes a fantastic journey. Abetted by Iff the blue-bearded water genie and Butt the mechanical hoopoe, Haroun must save the Ocean of Story from pollution and restore his father's powers. *If* and *but* are of course the essence of the imagination at work in language. Whether this most resembles post-modernist trickery or *Alice in Wonderland* I will leave to readers to decide. Haroun meets many "pages" who "rustle" when agitated, or may be "torn up" or "burned" in a battle; he travels to the Valley of K, through the Tunnel of I (which is also known as J), to the Town of G. The postman who delivers these letters (so to speak) is Mr. Butt, who says "A figure of speech is a shifty thing; it can be twisted or it can be straight. But Butt's a straight man, not a twister." From Iff the Water Genie the boy learns the magical power of naming things: "To give a

[3] HAROUN AND THE SEA OF STORIES, by *Salman Rushdie*. Granta Books/Viking. $18.95.

[4] Haroun al-Rashid is the legendary Caliph of Baghdad in *The Arabian Nights*, who also figures prominently in Barth's novel.

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thing a name, a label, a handle [is] to rescue it from anonymity, to pluck it out of the Place of Namelessness, in short to identify it." In the Land of Chup where the imagination can turn against itself and every story has an anti-story to destroy it, Haroun learns that "Shadows are considered the equals of the people to whom they are joined," but they like to dominate, or quarrel with, or even separate themselves from their originals. All this moves as lightly and swiftly as can be. There are wacky allusions to *Star Wars*, to the Beatles and the blues, to *The Wizard of Oz*, to Dr. Seuss. By the end we know that the supreme evils in Rushdie's realm are dullness, ignorance, bureaucracy, buttoned lips, the cowardly "minging" mind that hates and seeks to destroy what it cannot understand. Every sentence here dances mocking circles around that sort of mind. What Haroun knows at the beginning—"that the real world was full of magic, so magical worlds could easily be real"—the whole novel affirms. It's the fundamental notion in Rushdie's ocean of notions.

John Updike's tiresome fifty-six-year-old Rabbit survives a near drowning in Florida, but that doesn't rescue this fluid pudding of a novel from bathos.[5] The longest of the series that began in 1960 with *Rabbit, Run*, it is also the most uninspired. The first paragraph confirms what the title (and dust-jacket design) hint, that Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom dies in this one. So we are left with what Updike once called "gnostic suspense"[6]—hoping for some illumination, some grace or profundity of insight, to compensate for the giveaway plot. Now Updike is the most polished of writers, and he's expert at transforming beer cans and pencil shavings and snatches of popular song into American icons. He once made Rabbit's golf swing into a nearly mystical experience, and the "Pop/Mom/Moon" section of *Rabbit Redux* (1969) may be the most eloquent documentary of an era that Updike ever wrote. But the same effort fizzles here. He gets Rabbit into a sleek Florida hospital, with his anxious family around him, doctors issuing diet instructions, technology humming, and mixes in a channel-flipping collage of Fiesta Bowl parade, Bruce Lee film, Subaru commercial, NFC playoff game, Karl Malden for American Express, and the news reports from Lockerbie, Scotland. But the effect is clutter and tedium, not eloquence.

Beginning in *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981) Updike started getting sentimental about his gawky basketball-hero who fails so dismally as an adult human being. *Rabbit at Rest* has the same fault. The point of view is supposed to be Rabbit's, heightened by the present tense, but Updike lingers on every fine perception, and *cherishes* it verbally, turning up clever metaphors and making imaginative parallels far beyond the education (never mind the sensitivity and intelligence) of his hero.

[5] RABBIT AT REST, by *John Updike*. Alfred A. Knopf. $21.95.
[6] *Picked-Up Pieces* (1976), p. 226.

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Here are some of his supposed thoughts while anxiously watching himself undergoing an operation:

> Harry feels and then sees on the monitor his heart beat faster, twist as if to escape, twist in that convulsive spiral motion Dr. Olman in Florida demonstrated with his fist; the shadowy fist is angry, again and again, seventy times a minute; the anger is his life, his soul, mind over matter, electricity over muscle. The mechanically precise dark ghost of the catheter is the worm of death within him.

Since when did Rabbit become so precise of vision? Or imaginative? The doctor's quiet voice breathes "like a golf commentator into the mike as a crucial putt is addressed"; Rabbit feels "a *feathery* touch of nausea" as he lies buried beneath "concentrating green *tummocks*"; the images on the monitor are "like computer graphics in an insurance commercial, where *f*ragments *f*lickeringly *f*orm the logo." There's so little *angst* in Rabbit Angstrom's mind here—and so much artful sensibility—that it's ludicrous.

Not that there aren't good moments. Few American writers can describe as well as John Updike an old men's golfing foursome, or a failing car dealership, or families meeting in airports, or a child's sticky handclasp. Rabbit's angry confrontations with his son Nelson are all painfully convincing. So is Nelson himself, with his weak moustache and earring. So too is Rabbit's furtive visit to Thelma, who is dying but still loves him, even though all he wants is sex. And the best moment of all is when Rabbit gets caught in another selfish betrayal, of Janice (his wife) and Nelson, and does just what he has always done—he runs. It's a fine climax but alas not the novel's end. The real problem is lack of critical distance. Rabbit's failures are all seen through a gauze of tenderness and solicitude. Every female is sized up sexually, and her erogenous zones caressed by Updike's lavish style. Every instance of Rabbit's adolescent egotism and narcissism (which translate in adults into selfishness, ignorance, racism, sexism, and cruelty) is served up affectionately, as if Updike were his fond parent. Rabbit's opinions are thus supposed to be amusing: when he describes the Toyota sales staff as "A fag, a Wop, and a skirt," there's no real irony or contextual censure. When he repeatedly calls Janice "a mutt," there's no voice there to question him. Poor Rabbit, the novel seems to say, there's something wonderful about him, even though he screwed up everyone. Measure the difference between this and *Rabbit, Run* which is framed by a quotation from Pascal: "The motions of Grace, the hardness of the heart; external circumstances." Updike seems to have lost a good deal over the years, whether you call it critical distance or spiritual awareness—or simply art.

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The opposite is true of Nadine Gordimer, who has been writing just as long as Updike and—after sixteen books of fiction—ever more powerfully. She too writes in her latest novel of a family wrenched apart.[7] A poor "coloured" school teacher in the Transvaal, Sonny has taken his wife and children to a white suburb of Johannesburg, and joined the fight against apartheid. A powerful speaker, Sonny rises in the movement; he becomes "Sonny," a self claimed by a cause, a comrade, no longer merely a loving husband and father. The novel begins when his teen-age son Will (named for Shakespeare) sees his father at a cinema with Another Woman—and she is white. Shocked and ashamed, Will is drawn into his father's secret. To make the torment worse, the woman doesn't remain anonymous: she is Hannah Plowman, an activist no less highly principled than Sonny, a person of intelligence and warmth and decency. Against the beautiful dignity and reserve of his mother Aila, whom he loves, Will places images of Hannah, repellently blond and blue-eyed and pink, a fleshy figure of his father's inordinate lust.

The novel alternates between Will's painful first-person narratives and at least two others in third-person: that of an anonymous narrator who comments (ruefully, knowingly) about love's urgencies and illusions, about the erotics of political power, about the hungers of the disenfranchised; and that of Sonny, deeply in love with Hannah but torn by guilt and ambivalent love—for his race no less than for his family. He knows that loving Hannah means, in part, escaping to "a rich white man's domain of quiet and beauty screened by green from screams of fear and chants of rage, from the filth of scrap-heap settlements and the smashed symmetry of shot bodies." Gordimer allows no easy consciences, no moral complacency, no happy endings. Occasionally the point of view is Hannah's, looking at Sonny: "She kept for herself something she would never speak, not to anyone, certainly not to him—his mystery: *He's a good man.*" But it's the black male consciousness that dominates, Will and Sonny, not the sister and wife. Any reader must marvel at Gordimer's skill here, dissolving herself into these characters. Her authority about love, about adultery, about sex and politics and race, seems absolute, beyond question. She must have experienced this herself, you think, forgetting that she has that Jamesian gift of being one upon whom nothing is lost.

Some reviewers have identified the novel's anonymous third-person voice as Gordimer's. It's a voice that judges and formulates ("And now they passed into the second stage of the syndrome that Sonny, never having had the experience before, did not recognize"), that sometimes quotes Shakespeare ("Better to be vile than vile esteemed . . ."), and that often remains aloof. Not until the end does

[7] MY SON'S STORY, by *Nadine Gordimer*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $19.95.

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Gordimer reveal that the only narrator of the novel is Will. "I've made up what I wasn't there to experience myself," he says:

> Sometimes—I can see—I've told something in terms I wouldn't have been capable of, aware of, at the period when it was happening: the licence of hindsight. Sometimes I can hear my voice breaking through, my judgments, my opinions elbowing in on what are supposed to be other people's. . . . Sometimes memory has opened a trapdoor and dropped me back into the experience as if I were living it again . . . with the vocabulary that was all I had to express myself, then.

It's a brilliant device: the novel becomes not a series of internal monologues, but the effort of the family's most articulate victim to conjecture, to comprehend, what really happened to them all. It turns a bleak ending into one that suggests how social as well as personal redemption may lie in acts of selflessness, empathy and forgiveness. Writing the novel was such an act. I think Will gives the title to his father, "My son's story," because the voice isn't really his anymore, but Gordimer must also mean it to imply a larger wrenched-apart family than Sonny's.

Natalia Ginzburg speaks with another kind of authority, but it's equally dispassionate. Two of her early novellas, written in 1942, have recently been re-issued, and are not to be missed.[8] They belong to the grim Neo-Realist era of Moravia and DeSica, but suggest an even greater austerity. When Frances Frenaye's translation appeared in 1949, a typical reviewer (female) wrote that Ginzburg's "feeble-minded heroines" were "flat, unrealistic, one-dimensional." An astounding reaction, like saying the father in *Bicycle Thief* was too dumb to get a job. Were women really so incomprehensible to us in 1949? "The Dry Heart" is about a naive young wife unable to stop loving her eerily selfish, cagily indecisive husband, who betrays her steadily. "The Road to the City" is about an adolescent country girl, whose notions of urban glamor prevent her from recognizing real love until it's too late. Ginzburg's focus is always on oppressed women, women who never realize the causes of their suffering, but she makes no big statements: *E stato così*, she seems to shrug, "So it goes."

Not quite so successful is Jamaica Kincaid's fourth book, a series of first-person sketches by a West Indian girl who comes to big-city America as an *au pair* and hates it.[9] But then, Lucy wanted nothing more than to leave home in the first place. Kincaid's usual elegant

[8] THE ROAD TO THE CITY: Two Novellas, by *Natalia Ginzburg*. Trans. by *Frances Frenaye*. Arcade Publishing/Little, Brown. $16.95.

[9] LUCY, by *Jamaica Kincaid*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $16.95.

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style turns a bit sour in this impersonation. Mariah, the wealthy young American mother who tries so hard to comfort Lucy, comes out seeming ignorant and silly. Unhappy herself, Lucy has no compassion—which sometimes makes for a fascinating detachment. Her chapter on remembered sexual experience, "The Tongue," has a calculated indifference that is both amusing and sad. She is a fierce critic—like a lot of teenagers—and she is deeply alienated. But Kincaid seems to want us to forgive her at the end, without giving sufficient cause.

Whatever the merits of Kincaid's book, it echoes a familiar pattern of modern life: angry disappointed children and guilty inadequate parents. Contemporary fiction is full of it: put the blame on a mother's kisses or on Mr. and Mrs. Bridge, go to the Homesick Restaurant or listen to Portnoy's complaint. Becket had it right in *Endgame*: mom and dad in trash cans. Or as Philip Larkin sardonically put it, "They fuck you up, your mum and dad. / They do not mean to but they do. / They fill you with the faults they had / And add some extra, just for you." Now I am happy to say comes a new novel that turns all that upside down and is very funny in the bargain.[10] Mr. Baldwin and his wife Brenda have just returned to England after years abroad, to settle into a quiet retirement, bringing along their not-quite-certifiably insane son Raymond who has made their lives nightmarish for the last ten years. Most of the story is told in the letters and interior musings of the other children: Lorna, married to the careerist-academic Fred, is trying to write pop journalism and be a mother on the side; Garry, a sleazy narcissist, borrows money and strings along women and avoids a career; his more fastidious twin brother Graham avoids everyone he can, worries about his clerky job, conceals his embarrassing family from his fiancée, but makes a big show of helping mum and dad.

Parks skewers nearly everyone. His idea about letters is something like Jane Austen's: nowhere does human falsity shine forth so well as in a hypocritical letter. Here is Garry writing to Graham:

> I tried to explain to Mother that it was precisely this mindlessly interfering attitude of hers and Dad's, based, of course, on an exclusively petty bourgeois vision of social status and human values—remember Dad's drawerful of business cards he was so proud to have—that had split the family up in the first place and helped to send Raymond round the bend.

None of the children want the burden of Raymond, of course, so they fail to see how desperate their parents have become. Mr. Baldwin

[10] FAMILY PLANNING, by *Tim Parks*. Grove Weidenfeld. $17.95.

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putters about ineffectually with things, as if Raymond weren't there; his dotty-sounding wife seems to dither at one moment and rage the next. But they are both about to crack. Meanwhile Raymond goes on writing obscene letters, refusing to bathe, smashing rooms full of furniture, injuring his mother. What seemed merely funny at first becomes quite horrible. Mum and dad are not waving but drowning. Fortunately there are subtler, more complex human beings in this novel than was apparent at first. Gradually you see how skillfully Parks manages in the letters and private monologues to convey the odd mixtures that human beings are, the surprising depths, with nobody a fool or a hero. Writing letters—and the very act of dialogue, co-responding—become what the book affirms. As Lorna puts it,

> When you both spoke, and at least half listened, there was some interlocking device that held the words together . . . as if normal dialogue were really a kind of embrace in which each supported the other, even if you were both looking over each other's shoulders, or just arguing, or talking bus delays in queues under inadequate shelters. What mattered was that somebody spoke back.

This wry novel cuts deeper than most of the big books floating around these days.

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ROBERT McDOWELL

Beyond the Boom

THE OTHER DAY THE FRONT PAGE of my local Oregon newspaper, the Eugene *Register-Guard*, trumpeted the sour results of the latest poll by the *New York Times* and CBS News. According to the poll, nearly four in ten Americans surveyed "expected things to get worse in the country in the next five years." This mood, the poll continued, "coincides with deepening pessimism about the economy and is linked to a collapse of faith in the ability of government and politicians to make things better." Seventy-seven percent of those surveyed, a higher percentage than had ever been recorded in the twenty-five years during which researchers have measured our cynicism toward government, believed that only a few huge special interests controlled the government for personal gain and at the expense of everyone else.

I try to ignore polls—our cliff-notes for adults—as much as possible because they simplify and gloss over responses to conditions demanding more serious thought. But this poll amused me in light of the more strident claims found in *Beyond the Boom: New Voices on American Life, Culture, and Politics*, edited by Terry Teachout and with an introduction by Tom Wolfe.[1]

Teachout, an editor of the *Daily News* and editor of *Ghosts on the Roof: Selected Journalism of Whittaker Chambers, 1931–1959*, has put together an anthology as schizophrenic as the generation it represents. Of the fifteen collected essays, half tell important things about the seventy million Americans born from 1946 to 1964—the period of the post-war "baby boom"—and half pose extreme tests of one's tolerance and gullibility.

Foremost among the useful contributors are Roger Kimball, managing editor of *The New Criterion*, and Bruce Bawer, a poet and literary critic. Kimball, author of *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (Harper & Row), argues in "Requiem for the Critical Temper" against "the new intellectual poverty of the eighties." In that decade, he accurately contends, shared knowledge pretty much disappeared. "To be blunt, people didn't know very much. All across the board, in literature, dance, theater, music, and the visual arts, criticism was *out* while politicized cheerleading leav-

[1] BEYOND THE BOOM: New Voices on American Life, Culture and Politics, ed. by *Terry Teachout.* Introduction by *Tom Wolfe.* Poseidon Press. $18.95.

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ened with a knowing dollop of arcana was *in*." Contrasting the intellectual climates of the fifties and eighties, Kimball is so thoroughly convincing that one would have a hard time arguing that the latter decade had built on, or improved, the achievements of the former, and he is right to criticize the atmosphere of desperate compromise and lowered standards that damages our system of education. Kimball's calm, historical sensibility and commanding style are refreshing discoveries.

These admirable qualities are also found in Bruce Bawer's "Whatever Happened to Doris Day?" Like Kimball's essay, this romping examination of the generation through movies does not hesitate to criticize boomers. Rejecting the claim that film is the art form of the century because of its populist appeal, Bawer finds fault with the boomers' movies of choice, movies "often free of implication and explicit to the point of witlessness." Bawer's entertaining critique includes an accurate assessment of the acclaimed *The Big Chill* ("an empty orgy of generational self-love"), and makes the frequently ignored point that the generation's moviemakers, though often masters of film technique, seem incapable of writing good scripts, knowing anything about dramatic construction, or telling good dialogue from bad. "With the advent of baby boomer moviemakers, the dramatic content of American movies—and, therefore, the *human* content, the *conceptual* content—has withered drastically." If this situation persists, Bawer's prediction concerning the boom's cinematic legacy—"a consummate and abiding immaturity"—will inevitably come true. The keen boomer preoccupation with technical polish at the expense of the human touch extends to areas beyond film, and Bawer may strike quite close to the truth when he contends that boomers "have always been good at being shallow about important things and deadly serious about frivolous things."

Susan Vigilante approaches this perplexing truth from another angle. In "The Drunks Shall Inherit the Earth," she examines the phenomenon of the twelve-step programs (which mostly boomers attend) as a means of discussing her generation's "chronic spiritual malnutrition." No topic is more central to the discussion of boomers, and no greater challenge confronts them. As we witness, suffer, and contribute to the steady erosion of belief in church and family, boomers have created a unique rehab culture to satisfy the natural desire to believe in something greater than oneself. This desire contradicts the well-publicized image of boomers as greedy and unscrupulous. While Vigilante sees the irony here, she also trains her cool eye on the socio-political forces outside the generation that act on, and influence it. As she points out, "serious moral and spiritual training have not been particularly high on the national agenda lately." She sees hope in the boomers marching in droves into the rehab centers because they are "learning how to overcome the

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characteristic disease of their generation: they are learning how not to be jerks."

The perceptions, logic, wit, and style of Kimball, Bawer, and Vigilante comprise the highest achievement of *Beyond the Boom*; Donna Rifkind, John Podhoretz, David Brooks, and Andrew Ferguson also contribute efficient and insightful essays on more specialized topics such as the nature of publishing in New York and the film career of Steven Spielberg. These essays, though differing widely in specifics, share a clarity of vision unmatched by the book's other contributors.

Even so, one discovers valuable moments in at least two other essays. Like Susan Vigilante, George Sim Johnston in "Break Glass in Case of Emergency" focuses on the boomers' spiritual malaise and hunger. In an otherwise nervous, uneven piece, he gets it right when he contends that "most baby boomers find refreshment in a vague religiosity which does not interfere in any way with how they live." Johnston has exposed the boomers' desire for comfort and accommodation. At first, one might find little fault with such a desire, for everyone wishes to get along and to feel secure while doing so. Nevertheless, the boomers' path to fulfillment differs significantly from that of earlier generations in the importance it attaches to the proud man or woman standing separate and alone. This profound difference is beautifully reflected in the book's best quote, which Johnston reproduces from an article on the late Jackie Gleason in *Time*. In discussing Roman Catholicism and his lapsed practice of it, Gleason said, "Whenever I hear someone say that religion is their own personal affair, I am irritated. Religion can't be called personal . . . I have studied different religions to see if there was one more attractive for me. I only discovered I was seeking a religion that was more compatible to my way of thinking. I remained a Catholic. It wasn't comfortable, but what religion is to a sinner? While I might not carry out my obligations in any manner to be commended, at least I know where I stand." It is hard to imagine most self-absorbed boomers enduring the inner struggle that makes such insight possible, especially in "this funhouse of a republic," as Johnston puts it, "that is the enemy of the interior life." With its myriad distractions and creature comforts, "it will not let the mind be still."

The perception of a restless mind aware of the need to be still yet unable to attain stillness also surfaces in Maggie Gallagher's "House Lust (and Other Sexual Perversions of the Baby Boom Era)." Gallagher struggles to come to terms with the critical irony that members of this most affluent generation cannot afford the houses they lived in when they were children. Author of *Enemies of Eros: How the Sexual Revolution Is Killing the Family, Marriage and Sex and What You Can Do About It* and an editor for the Manhattan Institute, Gallagher honestly chronicles the difficulties of a professional woman alone who must hold down a job and raise a young child. It is hard on her (as it would be

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on any responsible parent) when her son, who is six, bitterly complains about their shabby Brooklyn apartment. As a PUP (poor urban professional), she cannot see how a career and family can be reconciled. "A house, a hearth, a heart of our own: these are our most intimate longings. For modern women, they are also contradictory." Are they? Gallagher is talking about contemporary America's regulation of the family. Through the tax code and our ignorant contempt for history, we have diminished the family's central cultural role, creating instead the perception, and in too many cases the reality, of the family as luxury item, akin to a second car, fur coat, or European vacation. Gallagher does recognize the empty promises following the Reagan tax cuts ("the much-lauded rise in family income during the Reagan era is largely a statistical illusion"), but she displays the same sort of weird detachment found in the essays of her more glowering peers when confronted with statistics showing that younger boomers might be paying now for their own political follies. When such discouraging statistics rise up, the response is often an exasperated *How Did This Happen?*—then a decision to keep right on going as before. This is exactly what a thoroughly media-trained intelligence can be expected to do. In a mind unused to independent thought, there is no ultimate grasp of cause and effect, no willingness to accept responsibility. Instead, many boomers push on, tormented by ever-consuming insecurity and frustration.

Should this surprise us? Not really. In a country that winks at failed marriage and serious care for children and the elderly, it is natural that the family would slide in importance. Its base has been so seriously eroded that many boomers (still emotional adolescents themselves) actually resent the idea and reality of family. There are many countries in the world where church and family are valued above all other institutions, but we do not live in one of them, and this is true despite the emotional rhetoric of our politicians. Boomers like Gallagher may resent their condition, but they have also made the critical choices, determining that the career must take precedence over the family. One must remember that the reverse could also be true. Boomers *could* choose to place the family before the career, perhaps relocating, and perhaps inventing new careers that implicitly acknowledge the greater importance of the family. This would require a major revision of how one looks at oneself and one's world, but if successful, boomers would be on their way to finding and nurturing the inner spiritual life so many desperately seek.

If these boomers find such steps impossible, they might at least take solace in the fact that they are better off than many of their less fortunate peers. But there is little evidence of any such grateful pleasure here. Like the character Rocco, portrayed by Edward G. Robinson in the movie, *Key Largo*, some of these boomers clearly want *more*, and like Rocco some will do anything to *get* more. Like it or not, that is one lesson the eighties pressed on us for keeps. The exasper-

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ated, irritable moments surfacing in Johnston's and Gallagher's essays express the shock that confident, intellectually gifted boomers feel on discovering that they too might be crushed by the bully pulpit they worked so hard to erect.

Such doubts do not much haunt the other six contributors to *Beyond the Boom.* Editor Teachout's foreword wastes little time in establishing certain priorities: "Everybody expected the older baby boomers to reshape America in their famously scruffy image. It never happened. In fact, their younger brothers and sisters have already done far more to change the way we live now. It's the younger boomers who are manning the desks in Washington, D. C., who are wielding steadily increasing influence in corporate boardrooms and TV control rooms; who, as they reach their mid-thirties, are firmly grasping the levers of power that the older boomers relinquished when Richard Nixon went home to California and America got out of Vietnam." In Teachout's simple world, correct thinkers will trash the older boomers, those children of the sixties who turned on and dropped out, and praise the younger boomers who later concentrated on landing powerful, well-paying jobs, helped elect Ronald Reagan to two terms, and saved America in the process.

Keeping Teachout company are five other essayists contributing high-pitched, sloganeering prose. Richard Vigilante promotes an aggressive defense of Yuppies while bashing the sixties and leftist progressive programs like AIDS education and housing for the poor. Richard Brookhiser seeks to justify boomer support for Reagan with snappy sentences like "Corporations outlasted bell-bottoms" and "the only baby boomer Gary Hart reached out and touched was Donna Rice," while fellow Manhattan Institute member Walter Olson, asserting that "those of us who arrived at college a year or two after the peace movement peaked were already becoming cynics on the subject of student idealism," also praises the Reagan era's accomplishments. Music critic Dana Mack apparently aims for a more personal touch by demolishing her former fellow students, and Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict Lisa Schiffren (no jokes, please, about the size of her business card) offers "A Whiff of Grapeshot," an amazing ode to war, which also argues how much we need one. Having toured Afghanistan, she wishes that the average American knew what the average Afghan knows. A good American war, fought at home, would go a long way toward rebuilding our national character.

Overloaded with examples of bathetic denial and self-hatred, these essays are all advocacy and generalization. It is amusing to note how often they begin with anecdotes drawn from the authors' college days. We learn that Brookhiser attacked anti-Vietnam War graffiti with white spray paint, that George Johnston frequented a Transcendental Meditation Center as a junior, that Teachout yearned to be the next Bob Dylan, then later returned to college and found direction by

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joining younger boomers working on the right-wing alternative campus newspaper. And one essay, Mack's "How I Got to be Political," is exclusively devoted to the grim days of the author's high school and college experiences. Describing herself as a child of privilege, Mack recalls how all she ever really wanted was to belong. She "tried on the left for size" (her word choice speaks volumes), but when acceptance on her terms was not forthcoming she became a conservative, which in her case appears to mean getting back at those whose political commitment was not bound up in insecure yearnings for social acceptance. In fact, "How I Got Even" would be a more appropriate title for this essay, and for the other five like it. All six look to market analysts and pollsters for support and confirmation of opinions while celebrating the superiority of conservative younger boomers. One gets the feeling that these are the kind of humorless people who would turn on Joe Di Maggio or The Beatles, refusing to forgive his getting old or their breaking up.

Though I am only three years older than Teachout myself, I'm fairly certain that he would classify me with the "old" dropped-out boomers. Three years' difference shouldn't mean a thing here, but at times the arguments of Teachout and others who share his views make me feel three *hundred* years older. I feel that way because these essayists appear not to have been even alive, much less awake, during the sixties, responding as they do only to the clichés of the period promoted by polls and other media simplifications designed to anesthetize real thinking and original expression. Their desire to stand up and be counted is understandable, but nothing justifies or condones their convenient revision of history or the phobias—anti-feminist, anti-environment, anti-sexual, anti-dissent—that surface everywhere to mar their writing. Further, their inclination to divide the generation into opposed factions does not bode well for dealing with the formidable problems confronting our own middle-and-old age. At the core of their defensive unhappiness is a serious identity crisis so typical among the young and incomplete. Because the younger boomers they speak for were not threatened and repelled by Vietnam (whose victims, living and dead, really do appear to be only statistics to them), because they did not suffer and do not remember the steady erosion of trust in our government and political process created by assassination, corruption, and betrayal, and because they played no significant part in the events of the sixties and seventies, they wish to cast themselves in a more flattering light than history in fact has turned on them. And even if one grants that younger boomers played a more significant role during the Reagan era than did their immediate elders, one may also wonder where are the political achievements to compare with the Civil Rights Movement (on which these writers are astonishingly silent), the struggle for women's rights, especially in the workplace, the Peace Corps, the Alliance for Prog-

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ress, and the many efforts to care for and feed the world's sick and hungry?

Beyond the Boom makes no case, finally, for the generation's phantom accomplishments. Its best essays by Kimball, Bawer, Brooks, Podhoretz, Ferguson, Rifkind, and Susan Vigilante explode Teachout's claim of a unified front and challenge the generation to accomplish more in the future than it has to date. Their efforts alone make this collection valuable, for they have a lot of true things to say about boomers. For the generation's sake, and for the future, we must hope that they continue to produce and thrive. As for the others, graduates of the Pat Buchanan school of thought with whom they keep an uneasy company, we had better hope for divine intervention.

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DENNIS SAMPSON

Poetry Chronicle

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE A VISION in our time, "in this century and moment of mania," as Robert Penn Warren called it? Is it possible to speak any more, as Whitman did, of humanity as a whole without sounding pompous or political?

Mary Oliver's new book[1] yields, as did Thoreau, to everything in nature that is holy. Some may find seeming artlessness and obsession with birds, beasts, and flowers absurd in her new work; she is not a formalist and is drawn almost exclusively to what is not human in her poetry. Oliver is disarming in her innocence and deft at calling up brilliant similes, a thoughtful and thoroughly empathetic human being. Watching a heron, she says "A blue preacher / flew toward the swamp, / in slow motion," a swan is "a slim / and delicate ship" and "moves / on its miraculous muscles / as though time didn't exist." She describes an oak tree at the entrance to a pond, "when the storm / laid one lean yellow wand against it, smoking it open / to its rosy heart," and, in "The Summer Day," after watching the grasshopper in her hand "moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down," she offers this final comment:

> I don't know exactly what prayer is.
> I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
> into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
> how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
> which is what I have been doing all day.
> Tell me, what else should I have done?
> Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
> Tell me, what is it you plan to do
> with your one wild and precious life?

One hears echoes of James Wright and Galway Kinnell, writers to whom Oliver would not resent being compared. Oliver risks sentimentality when love of the world almost gives in to emotions not won by the poem, but finally she is too wise to let this happen. "Lilies" ("I have been thinking about living / like the lilies / that blow in the fields") recalls Whitman's "I think I could turn and live with animals."

[1] HOUSE OF LIGHT, by *Mary Oliver*. Becaon Press. $14.95.

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The poem concludes with this felicitous reference to a hummingbird:

> I think I will always be lonely
> in this world, where the cattle
> graze like a black and white river—
>
> where the ravishing lilies
> melt, without protest, on their tongues—
> where the hummingbird, whenever there is a fuss,
> just rises and floats away.

Pity sings a hideous and ultimately futile song to itself, as Oliver knows. "Make of yourself a light," says the Buddha in her "The Buddha's Last Instruction" before he dies. And Oliver does this. "Slowly, beneath the branches, / he raised his head. / He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd."

These may not be great poems, but they are awfully fine, wise even. Of the roses in "Roses, Late Summer" that "have opened their factories of sweetness / and are giving it back to the world," she scolds, as a Zen Master might:

> Fear has not occurred to them, nor ambition.
> Reason they have not yet thought of.
> Neither do they ask how long they must be roses, and then what.
> Or any other foolish question.

Marianne Moore, in her poem "Pick and Choose," said "Words are constructive / when they are true; the opaque allusion—the simulated flight / upward—accomplish nothing." One wishes Charles Wright had heard and believed this early on. In his recent book,[2] fine lyrics like "Laguna Beach," "Hawaii Dantesca," and "Gate City Breakdown" are lost amid what Lowell called "the noise of my own voice." Beautiful lines ("I've looked at this ridge of lights for six years now / and still don't like it, / Strung out like Good Friday along a cliff / That Easters down to the ocean") fight against the torrent of horrible ones: "How sweet to think that Nature is solvency, / That something empirically true / Lies just under dead leaves / That will make us anchorites in the dark / Chambers of some celestial perpetuity . . ."

The World of the Ten Thousand Things gathers work of a decade. Is there a more consistently somber contemporary American poet? One has to go back to Anne Sexton to find one as anguished. There seems a methodical pathology to his writing: the tendency to argue the same conclusion in poem after poem. Sexton overcame this through endless pursuit, but Wright has difficulty because of the focus on a self

[2] THE WORLD OF THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS: Poems 1980–1990, by *Charles Wright*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. $25.00.

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satisfied with early conclusions. Consequently, the search seems purposeless:

—Words, like all things, are caught in their finitude.
They start here, they finish here
No matter how high they rise—
My judgement is that I know this
And never love anything hard enough
That would stamp me
and sink me suddenly into bliss.

Wright composes two kinds of poems; one leaning heavily on startling and often bizarre images ("The early blooms on the honeysuckle shine like maggots after the rain") and asserting an order through statements calculated to clarify ("Sadness is truer than happiness"); the other narrative, and about his past. He does the latter fairly well. The second book represented here (*The Other Side of the River*) is especially refreshing after we have struggled through the title poem of *The Southern Cross*, an opaque meditation of unrelated images about his life in Venice that doesn't produce the incantatory effect he intends. "As always, silence will have the last word" and "Everyone's life is the same life / If you live long enough" fall flat. The prophetic tone is particularly objectionable in a poet who, for all his spurious proclamations, doesn't know what he wants.

What is frighteningly clear is that Wright has yet to find a subject; all the beautiful words don't matter. Good poetry is lucid and has a life of its own driven by necessity—not by languid musings that settle on allusions, exotic settings and empty gestures as machinery for the poem.

John Haines's poetry won't appeal to readers lacking the patience to read slowly. A visionary in the best sense, Haines speaks eloquently of modern man's need to satisfy himself even at the expense of nature, a sentiment that takes on even greater significance in his new book.[3] An oracular voice meticulously records a life lived passionately at the fringe:

I am not old, not yet, though
like the wind-turned birch
spared by the axe,
I claim this clearing
in the one country I know.
"Rain Country"

These are the fruits of profound reflection and persistent inquiry into the nature of mind and soul by one who sees penetratingly. "Medi-

[3] NEW POEMS: 1980–88, by *John Haines*. Story Line Press. $16.95.

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tation on a Skull Carved in Crystal" gives new meaning to what the ancients did every day when they placed a skull before them on the table:

> All suns, all moons, all days,
> find their completion here,
> as blood finds its pool of quiet
> where mercury sleeps, and night
> with its pallor of threads
> draws the sutures closer.

Haines has a voice mysterious as Trakl's:

> Hierarchies, lists of the
> flowering and cheeping world:
> of these and what
> we knew this to be,
>
> death is the last confusion.

In his introduction to this collection, Dana Gioia stresses the need to be patient with Haines's work, for this poet has won from experience a singularly exacting vision. If the work appears unanalyzable so much the better. This may be as close as we ever get to the elegiac song of a soul devoted to the only story it knows:

> Snow is falling, the sun is late,
> and someone has gone with a lantern
> to search the road.
> "The Forest Without Leaves"

Pretension and disdain reach through Mark Strand's first book in ten years, *The Continuous Life*,[4] an accumulation of curious poems and prose poems by one of our better-known writers. It was John Ciardi who commented that after craft had been mastered, failures in the writing were failures of character; and Strand, who has wrtten some fine things, especially when composing at length, as in "The Story of Our Lives" and "The Untelling," appears to have reached a point at which criticism of individual lines no longer seems to him to be necessary.

> And though it was brief, and slight, and nothing
> To have been held onto so long, I remember it,
> As if it had come from within, one of the scenes

[4] THE CONTINUOUS LIFE, by *Mark Strand*. Alfred A. Knopf. $18.95.

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> The mind sets for itself, night after night, only
> To part from, quickly and without warning.
> "Luminism"

This and most of the poems in this volume are at the mercy of a posture which rarely allows engaging speech and undermines any effort to argue imaginatively. Descriptions of landscape and seascape sound like Hemingway:

> A frieze of clouds lowered a shadow over the town,
> And driving wind flattened the meadows that swept
> Beyond the olive trees and banks of hollyhock and rose.
> The air smelled sweet, and a girl was waving a stick
> At some crows so far away they looked like flies.
> "Velocity Meadows"

Like Charles Wright, Strand glides from forgettable image to image without any apparent wish to test himself, mimicking Auden in "Grotesques," Stevens in "The End," Donald Justice in "Life in the Valley" for reasons that become obvious after a time: the subject of Mark Strand's life no longer seems accessible to him in his poetry. For this reason, too many poems seem written in jest as an exercise in creative writing, aping gestures, say, of Stevens in "Lunar Paraphrase":

> Not every man knows what he shall sing in the end,
> Watching the pier as the ship sails away, or what it
> will seem like
> When he's held by the sea's roar, motionless, there
> in the end,
> Or what he shall hope for once it is clear that he'll
> never go back.
> "The End"

Donald Justice can do this because he makes it authentic. Strand can't. There is dumbfoundingly little underneath these elegantly embroidered garments, "a blown husk that is finished" perhaps, or worse, a mocking and satisfied and complacent self.

Peyton Houston's fourth book,[5] in three sections, traces the process of contemplation, finding its paradigm in Whitman, using long lines and making transitions quickly. Although he is more contemplative than Whitman and doesn't speak as assuredly of the self, interpreting historical and mythological events in relationship to his central

[5] THE CHANGES/ORDERS/BECOMINGS, by *Peyton Houston*. The Jargon Society. $20.00.

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question—"Of whom were we born? And why?"—the nature of the task is the same: to affirm the sacredness of being and bear witness to this in language we can believe. Inverting his gaze, Houston discovers the deity that won't be named and that has "the innocence of any absolute":

> In the images made of him
> He is not present:
> In the beliefs contrived about him
> He is not believable,
> Yet the awareness comes back
> In a seeing knowing
> If the intent be exact to itself,
> If the trust be given,
> Then He is named by any name,
> Inhabits any image.

In the first and strongest section, Houston is utterly convincing in his presentation of what haunts him throughout the book. In this ancient craving for certainty where none seems possible, he exclaims,

> I have studied mysteries,
> Have measured pi-meson, weighed galaxies,
> From the parallaxes of love have determined the magnitude
> of hunger. I have not found
> Anything new,
> Nor heard the essential name.

With so little to be sure of and so much to refute, he brings an exceptional integrity to this terrifying vision. Finding neither *will* nor *chance* nor *need* as sufficient to explain creation, Houston expresses his bewilderment, saying,

> None of these answer
> Or answer to the inexplicable violence that there should
> have been world
> When light looked only at light so that there was no light
> And the egg of beginning hatched and the great bird flew
> In its flight creating world and the laws of world,
> Creating space, creating time, creating difference, creating us—
> "A singularity without dimension
> Infinitely hot, infinitely dense."
> Expanding, exploding—
> Why?

These are not the reveries of an adolescent mind pretending an understanding of things not seen or reconciling itself to meaningless-

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ness and *ennui*. Since Houston does not have anywhere near the inclination for creating images that Whitman did, lapses occur due to his reluctance to conjure the physical world. Nevertheless, Houston is clearly in the hunt from the beginning and hasn't any trouble sustaining this poem. After scientific and philosphical explanations have been rejected, like Jacob with the Angel he demands blessing: "Now in the dimness you can see his face, / In the moment look face to face. / Now you can demand blessing." A remarkable vision is at work here in this often clumsy and complicated and necessary work of art, one that embraces and claims as its own what others have turned away from. Houston has created a testimony that turns inward and emerges whole:

> Listen: voices are calling
> Out of the air, from the seas, from the earth
> Always.
>
> Calling and calling you
> To come forth, enter the further,
> Go in the orders of a new finding,
> To let love guide you.

The thread so delicately woven through most of this poem catches occasionally ("Sometimes in my thought I am haunted (hunted) by the possibility that what- / ever I am is only a kind of window opening into something, / A landscape perhaps, or many landscapes"). Still, it would be ludicrous to focus on these moments, as, say, it is on the chorus of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which this poem in some respects resembles: to learn to risk the journey, avoiding the trappings of cynicism and despair.

Adam and Eve, Osiris, Gautama under the Bo-tree, Mozart ("a little man in a red coat and a cocked hat leading *Figaro*"), all are included, making their contribution to the journey. Wishing to see "In the created thing . . . the creating thing" Houston winds up this hard-won vision with a revaluation of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden:

> Here we have come:
> Here, a little, we see.
> Felicity forming,
> Simplicity we cannot explain,
> Exactness we cannot name:
> No sound in this silence
> But who is that speaking to us?

And finally:

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As the celebration is in the awareness,
As the awareness is from the becoming,
As the becoming is the idea learning itself.

When I read Frank Bidart's *The Sacrifice* several years ago I felt I had discovered a writer able to dramatize with authority themes as rare in verse as those of Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven"—those dealing with guilt and the pursuit of personal redemption. Bidart's monologues worked through labyrinths of human relations and were evidence once again that symbols exist for us because we belong to two worlds: this one, and the other in which concepts cannot be represented directly. "Man needs a metaphysics; / he cannot have one," the narrator of "Confessional" says, a conclusion come to after much wrestling with the truth of his mother's meaningless existence and his heroic struggle to forgive himself. Constantly talking to the therapist within, a conscience not only heightening suspense but testing the coward in each of us, the protagonist finishes this pilgrimage with the above-mentioned admission. The poem is testimony to what Nietschze said: "My truths are bloody truths."

His collected poems, *In the Western Night*,[6] demonstrate how these themes came to pass for Bidart. The first two books, *Golden State* and *The Book of the Body*, are largely autobiographical, the father a central figure. In the title poem of *Golden State*, after the alcoholic father's death, the son insists to himself:

I must *unlearn*; I must believe

you were merely a man—
with a character, and a past—;
You wore them,
unexamined,

like a nimbus of
furies

round your
greying, awesome head . . .

"Herbert White," a persona piece confessing a sociopath's murder of a young girl and his freedom from responsibility for this, is a harrowing analysis of the mind of a son estranged from his father—from himself—who returns where the victim is hidden to masturbate and can't: "I tried and tried, but there was just me there, / and her, and the sharp trees / saying, 'That's you standing there. / You're . . .

[6] IN THE WESTERN NIGHT: Collected Poems 1965–90, by *Frank Bidart*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. $19.95.

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just you":

> —HELL came when I saw
> MYSELF
> and couldn't stand
> what I see . . .

Like Haines with his crystal skull, Bidart speculates from every conceivable angle on the sordidness as well as the pathetic tenderness of human beings and even gives the impression that he is fighting for his life. In his best work, which is not predominately autobiographical—as for example "The War of Vaslav Nijinsky"—he achieves a level of artistic excellence we don't often get to see. Bidart's characters invariably end up recognizing how far they have travelled from themselves. "Ellen West," a long poem from his second book, *The Book of the Body*, gives us the confession of an anorexic, interspersed with clinical evaluations by her psychiatrist. There is a lovely moment near the end. Ellen speaks of hiking with her friends. As they rest, she circles relentlessly, "afraid to hike ahead alone, / yet afraid to rest, / when I was not truly thin." Writing to a friend she made in the hospital, she acknowledges that

> You and, yes, my husband—
> you and he
>
> have by degrees drawn me within the circle;
> forced me to sit down at last on the ground.

It is the inexplicable connection between daughter and mother, father and son, guilt and forgiveness that interests Bidart and he is masterful at examining this, a dark night of the soul bearing the wounded characters along and of which he says, in "Poem in the Stanza of the 'Rubaiyat,'" "is this night / one more thing you'll try to kill in you to live?" This is not a heavenly vision and refrains from offering hope, but it is a vision of infinite pity and compassion for even the most reprehensible among us, the tragic drama of the domestic milieu enacted over and over by a writer unwilling to settle for anything less than the truth. "We reach across our separateness," Houston says. Bidart and Houston arrive at the same conclusion, although down different paths. My only argument is with Bidart's sometimes indiscriminate use of adjectives ("How her soul, uncompromising, insatiable"; "beneath their bewildered, desperate feet"; "indecipherable, furious cataract of life") that diminish the narrative's impact. In "The First Hour of the Night," the last poem in the book, the speaker experiences a dream of purity and wakes "with a sense of beneficence":

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an emotion which, though it did *not*
erase, TRANSFORMED

what earlier had overwhelmed
consciousness lying SLEEPLESS between dream and dream.

The best of our poets continue to seek what the greatest writers have always sought: a vision of humanity that does not avert its eyes and that embraces the whole story, horrific as it may be. In doing so, they reiterate what Blake said better than anyone else almost two hundred years ago: "Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth."

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JAMES FINN COTTER

The Truth of Poetry

I ONCE REVIEWED A SEQUENCE OF POEMS about a marriage and divorce. The story was detailed, painful, funny, and fully involving. I later learned that the poet had made up the whole thing. I was delighted. I had been taken in by the author's voice and the entire situation he had imagined. The truth of poetry is not in reciting facts but in creating veracity. I ask a poem to be true to itself, to convince me and to capture my attention with its thought, emotion, imagery, and language. Do not preach or put on airs, I tell the poem. Tell the truth, and I'll believe you. What more can a reader ask?

"I'm no good . . . I have a weak link with life," Yevgeny Yevtushenko complains in "I don't understand," a poem from his newly collected poetry.[1] He qualifies his disarming admission, however, with an ingenuous self-defense: "But if I connect with so many things, / I must, apparently, stand for something." Yevtushenko has stood for many good causes in the past thirty years: poetry as a voice that rallies public consciousness, freedom to speak out in protest against human rights violations, a world view that transcends nationalist boundaries, and the power of the individual against bureaucracy and oppression. Yevtushenko has also represented poetry turned to publicity and performance, for propaganda or self-aggrandizement. What is the truth?

The answer is not simple. Even the 684-page *Collected Poems*, as we learn from translator Albert Todd's informative and defensive introduction, is a selection from the three-volume Russian edition. Yevtushenko has been a prolific poet, making his travels, domestic crises, politics, reading, and life grist for his mill. He is a chameleon, writing in a variety of styles, the satiric epic of Pushkin, the nationalistic narrative of Blok, the pastoral lyrics of Pasternak, and the personal confessions of Lowell and Akhmadulina. In "Poetry is a great power," he writes:

> Poetry is a kingdom
> in which the truth rules in every city,
> where one is judged both for poverty and riches,
> where the ruler is whoever becomes its slave.

[1] THE COLLECTED POEMS 1952–1990, by *Yevgeny Yevtushenko*. Ed. by *Albert C. Todd* with the author and *James Ragan*. Henry Holt & Co. $29.95.

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The capital of this country is Pushkin, Lermontov is a city, Yesmin a village, and Pasternak "the eternal suburb." Yevtushenko obviously wants to be the whole globe.

Yevtushenko gets around: from his youth in remote Siberia, to Europe, America, South America, Africa, and Japan; he protests in Moscow, New York City, Ulster, South Africa; he is in Chile when Allende is murdered and in "A Dove in Santiago: A Novella in Verse" relates that death to a young man's suicide. The poet's power to narrate seems as inexhaustible as his passion to be everywhere at once. His eye for detail and ear for conversation are matched by his need to generalize about what he sees and hears. On the deeper, or higher, level of thought he often disappoints. He has both too much and too little to say.

Even when he is shallow, Yevtushenko can be engaging. In his blast at modern writers, "The Incomprehensible Poets," he admits: "My guilt is my simplicity. / My crime is my clarity." He declares in "I Would Like": "I would like to belong to all times, / shock all history so much / that it would be amazed / what a smart aleck I was." From stealing his grandmother's ring for a soccer ticket to envying an eight-year-old poet who shares the platform with him, Yevtushenko shows himself as a vain, suspicious, gregarious, trusting and untrustworthy human being. He says in "Verbosity":

> I am verbose both in my daily life
> and in my verse—that's your bad luck—
> but I am cunning: I realize
> that there's no lack of will
> behind this endless drivel,
> rather my strong ill will!

For fear of being eternal, the poet is eager to run on in time.

In the fine autobiographical poem "Zima Junction: A Poem," Yevtushenko describes returning to his birthplace at nineteen, meeting again his aunts and uncles in the open spaces and rich country life of Siberia. Beneath the surface, however, he discovers a loss of purpose and disillusioned lives; the two uncles he admires turn out to be a drunkard and a womanizer. He confesses his despair to an old schoolmate friend who asks: "Do you think it's only you?" The poet's success has been to tap the discontent not just in the Soviet system but in modern life. He preaches and poses, he overexplains, he exasperates with clichés ("freedom is calling") and moralizing ("Let's be equal to it"), but bumbling, boasting, bemusing, Yevtushenko is our latter-day Whitman, the kosmos we have come to be, glasnost and all.

The poems that will live on may not be the public ones like "Babii Yar" and "Russian Tanks in Prague" but personal accounts like "On a Bicycle" and "Flowers for Grandmother." "Blue Fox" combines concern for animals with an allegory of the collective state; "Mono-

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logue of an Actress" is a witty complaint by an aging actress that no worthwhile roles are left to play. Many of the New York poems, ably translated by John Updike, have a resonance of time and place that rings true. Stanley Kunitz, Ted Hughes, James Dickey, Richard Wilbur, and editor Albert Todd are among the poets who have rendered Yevtushenko into clear, readable English.

In his third collection of poems, *God Hunger*,[2] Michael Ryan shows himself to be a poet willing to take risks, to leap from the trivial into the mysterious, to turn a chance snapshot into a glimpse of a history of poverty and pain. "Boy 'Carrying-In' Bottles in Glass Works" takes a 1911 photograph of a young factory worker by Lewis Hine and subjects it to the lens of poetry as "only one memory of brutality / on the world's infinite list."

Ryan is not afraid or embarrassed to look and sound absurd in his own efforts to cope with human suffering and to live unselfishly. He comes off awkwardly in "TV Room at the Children's Hospice" when he tries to console a mother whose son is in danger of becoming a quadriplegic after a diving accident. He fails miserably to protest against a childhood friend who took pleasure in hanging frogs ("The Crown of Frogs"). A burglary at Yaddo, a visit to a country fair, a meeting with novelist John Cheever in 1973, a picture of a twelve-year-old girl having her hair shaved by Nazis, and a winter walk in the Virginia countryside are not just occasions for poems, but moments of self-confrontation. In each instance the poet must transcend the self and become "a pure observer, / for once oblivious // to the spurs of ego and desire" ("Pedestrian Pastoral"). "Passion" is about the act of writing, how bright and clean it can be as it breaks through the clutter of everyday life. Knotting newspapers for kindling, the poet comes across an article (with photo) about a woman who married a San Quentin prisoner. He pauses to imagine her dream for a passion that is real and to reflect on the etymology of "passion" as "suffering; Christ's scourging and crucifixion." In the end, he burns the newspaper page, a symbolic act of how all stories flash and flare out. "Fire" fuses the image of the woodstove and the self:

> I think of myself as dust of bones
> mornings when I awake
> to find the fine white ash
> lining the bottom of my box stove.

Sleep is like logs burning, encircled by dreams that hold us: "With the fire, in the darkened room, / my life begins not to be my own." The title poem, "God Hunger," explicitly resolves the struggle to transcend the self:

[2] GOD HUNGER, by *Michael Ryan*. Viking. $17.95.

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When the immutable accidents of birth—
parentage, hometown, all the rest—
no longer anchor this fiction of the self
and its incessant *I me mine*,

then words won't be like nerves in a stump
crackling with messages that end up nowhere,
and I'll put on the wind like a gown of light linen
and go be a king in a field of weeds.

To leave self behind is to become legend and fairy tale, the truth of poetry which is myth. That consummation devoutly to be wished is stated and pictured here simply and profoundly. Ryan has the voice and the vision to go be that king or at least a sweet prince with a story to tell.

Marilyn Nelson Waniek, in her third volume of poems,[3] sets her sights on homecoming, returning to family roots. It all begins with "The House on Moscow Street," a place that is mostly porch both in photo and verse. A more nondescript dwelling could hardly be imagined, but here the American dream begins for the author's family. Freed from slavery, her great-grandfather Pomp lived here with his wife Annie and their seven children. The house is haunted (Pomp's ghost has spoken to relatives) and boasts the first indoor plumbing in town. Pomp's mother Diverne had no place of her own; she was seduced by her mistress's son, a Civil War soldier:

Chosen

Diverne wanted to die, that August night
his face hung over hers, a sweating moon.
She wished so hard, she killed part of her heart.

If she had died, her one begotton son,
her life's one light, would never have been born.
Pomp Atwood might have been another man:

born with a single race, another name.
Diverne might not have known the starburst joy
her son would give her. And the man who came

out of a twelve-room house and ran to her
close shack across three yards that night, to leap
onto her cornshuck pallet. Pomp was their

[3] THE HOMEPLACE, by *Marilyn Nelson Waniek*. Louisiana State University Press. $14.95; $7.95.

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share of the future. And it wasn't rape.
In spite of her raw terror. And his whip.

From her great-great-grandmother Diverne, Waniek traces her family history through five generations. In a lively, intricate narrative, she fits the poems like jigsaw pieces into a pattern of lights and shadows. Sometimes too much undigested reportage from family records, dug up by research grants, makes the family tree look like a forest of relatives, and the free verse sets it out trunk, limbs and leaves, but often humorous flashes of truth, gospel rhythms, and the vibrant repertoire of voices carry the reader onward scene after scene.

The second part of the book makes the sky the homeplace where the author's father was part of a black aviator group in World War II. These pilots' story-telling voices dance off the page with heroism and humor. "Porter" gives a comic account of a highly-decorated colonel who receives a dime tip when he helps a white woman with her baggage. "Freeman Field" reports how a hundred black officers were confined under guard when they refused to obey the commanding officer who had banned them from the Officers' Club. Waniek tells a complex story of struggle, strife, dignity, and determination with compassion and objectivity. It is well to be reminded of the injustices and stupidities of small-minded men who would lynch a black soldier home in uniform as a lesson to keep one's place and of the men and women whose courage overcame blind prejudice by ties of righteous love.

The strain of myth in ordinary life is the subject of Eavan Boland's impressive new collection, *Outside History*.[4] Her first American volume contains new poems and a selection of two of her previous five books of poetry published in Ireland. Her own childhood and domestic life, as well as the lives of other women, are resurrected from the past and set in the present like "bright-cut Irish silver." In the title poem she compares the past to fields of stars; she places herself in present time:

Out of myth into history I move to be
part of that ordeal
whose darkness is

only now reaching me from those fields,
those rivers, those roads clotted as
firmaments with the dead.

School years in London taught the poet the meaning of exile early: to hear her own language, to remember landscapes and people, and to dream of regaining her lost childhood world. Today, in Dublin, she

[4] OUTSIDE HISTORY: Selected Poems 1980–1990, by *Eavan Boland*. W. W. Norton & Co. $17.95.

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remains an outsider and observer who sees, listens, and feels differences as a contemporary Irish woman, all three essential elements of her identity. A modern feminist in Ireland spins her own myths of Ceres, Daphne, and Sappho: "My muse must be better than those of men / who made theirs in the image of their myth" ("Envoy"). A number of poems recall school days in England, a stranger in search of herself. "The Game" concludes:

> Later on I would get up and go to school in
> the scalded light which fog leaves behind it;
> and pray for the King in chapel and feel dumbly for
> the archangels trapped in their granite hosannas.

The death of George VI, rationed food, convent manners, and her brogue are among the fragments Boland shores up. She studied the *Aeneid* and learned Latin and religion from the nuns, centuries ago and yesterday.

Gardens, flowers, birds, cats, kitchens, hills rising beyond windows, frost-covered fields, swans scattering overhead, mornings and nights in a sleeping house swell the lines of these poems crowded with sights and sounds of memory. In "What Love Intended," she images herself as a ghost returning to the rack and ruin of her own home. Boland feels compelled to reconstruct the lives of her grandmother and her five young orphaned daughters in "Fever" and to define her own vocation as a poet in "The Women." People and places are forever fading away; we are always too late when we arrive at the scene. In "What We Lost," the poet's grandmother tells her mother a story: a legend becomes language only to be forgotten. In these eloquent poems, Boland is a poet of silence and loss, telling the truth of her exile.

J. Allyn Rosser makes all the right moves in her first book of poems, *Bright Moves*.[5] She speaks with authority and directness about finding her way as a woman and poet, growing up, falling in love, making and breaking relationships. She touches painful moments with a brush of humor and lets her imagination roam in recounting daily encounters. "Solitary Figure, Adirondack Chair" creates a fantasy of another woman's life that mirrors her own; in "The City Underneath," she tells the reader how to see what she sees:

> Stand very still some coolish evening.
> See if you can't grasp the extra galaxy past
> the last one visible on clearest nights—don't look
> for anything. Let your eyes go completely out of your head.
> Just make sure it's dark, cool. Stand very still. Look at me,

[5] BRIGHT MOVES, by *J. Allyn Rosser*. Northeastern University Press. $8.95p.

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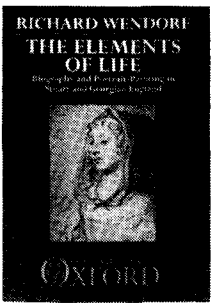
The Elements of Life



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my eyes, if that will help. The words I really want to say to you
are under these.

"Clippings" offers a lively monologue in which a daughter describes how her mother wants to guide her reading. In "Getting Wise" the author learns the limits of truth when she ends up working one summer in a plastics factory instead of waitressing. She concludes that you have to color your identity in order to get your way. In "Post-thalamion" and other poems about marriage and separation Rosser follows the crooked course of love with irony and imagery worthy of John Donne. Like Boland's mother, Rosser's father was a painter. Both poets like to people their landscapes with parents, relatives, lovers, children and other passing lives that fill the crossroads and corners of their existence. Narrative impulse, shifting detail, and sharp pictures make Rosser's poetry an adventure in reading.

Dennis Sampson's second book of verse is aptly titled, *Forgiveness*.[6] The poems are an act of forgiving the past: parents and kin, friends and enemies, and oneself above all. Again, narrative serves the search for truth in experience. Through memory, for example, the poet describes in the title poem the time when a drunken father is reconciled to his wife by the help of their children. Sampson acts the archetypal son sorting out his conflicts with his father and trying to heal old wounds while learning to be a father himself. The struggle becomes a parable of a man's relationship with God, as Sampson declares in his opening poem, "I Wish I Knew Another Name for God," which reverses Robert Frost's "Design" by creating a multitude of gods at work in the spider's world. How we picture God directs how we see and treat one another. In "The Commandment," the author recalls how his failure to make his rounds as a night-watchman contributed to a young man's suicide. At the time he stayed at his desk writing poetry, believing the imagination placed him "above blame and bitterness" borne of living in an indifferent universe. For a while he justified himself; now he asks forgiveness from the man and the reader through this poetic confession. Sampson does not present himself in a flattering light. With parents and sisters he often acts like a spoiled brat; he tells about his voyeurism, superstition, and pride. In "Addendum," the final poem, the poet faces his own anger when, as a child, his father ran the car off the road:

What did we know
racing down a path that is lost to us now?

[6] FORGIVENESS, by *Dennis Sampson*. Milkweed Editions. $8.95p.

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And then a calm comes over us, wind cooling our faces.

Look how easily we have forgiven them all.

Sampson is not afraid to ask hard questions in a simple way, without giving easy answers. In "Mercy for a Girl Turned Over to Face the World," he pauses over his reading of Pascal to wonder: "Why should there be anything other than nothing? / Why are we here? What is it like to die?" He ponders Dante's journey into hell, his heart telling him hell exists and his head denying it. Talking to himself, Sampson cannot help talking to us: "Secrets I keep from myself / I can't stop telling others." Extraordinary dialogue, that lets the reader overhear the deep unrest that wrestles with existence, and that will not rest, as Augustine says, until it rests in Thee. Pascal, Dante, Augustine, Paul, as well as Robert Lowell and John Berryman are among the persons to appear in these poems, not as dead voices but as living presences. In "Touching the Outstretched Hand" he imagines Dante in hell coming to meet him; he looks up at the stars and recalls Michelangelo:

I prefer mystery above my head,
enough for the mind touching the outstretched
hand of Adam,
the fingertip of God.

Between hell and heaven, the God who punishes and rewards, Sampson prefers the God who forgives, extending his hand of being and mercy to his creatures. Readers can be grateful for such moments and for this one from the series, "The Door that Only Opens on Its Own":

Tired of being alone
I walked into the prairie blossoms, praising Him
in a way I understand
only at a distance of twenty years,
the half moon, shining down on me,
beautifully detached—with night not far behind.
I waited for the word that would not come
in spite of my vigil,
a magpie reappearing above the nearest maple.
Made blameless, in my eyes,
I could feel the flow of eternity in my clothes,
blue and moving,
evident in the pressure against my face.

Out of experience and poetry, the mind and heart seek a truth to follow and then, Sampson suggests, we try to walk in its blameless light.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

HAROLD FROMM's *Academic Capitalism and Literary Value* will be published by the University of Georgia Press this fall. He is currently at work on a book about the mythmaking tendencies of contemporary, ecologically-oriented "nature-writing." . . . MARK JARMAN teaches English at Vanderbilt University. His latest book of poetry is *The Black Riviera* (Wesleyan University Press). His poem in this issue is part one of *Iris*, due out from Story Line Press in 1992. . . . GILBERTO PEREZ is professor of film history at Sarah Lawrence College. His piece in this issue is the title essay in his forthcoming book on film. . . . BETH McGRATH works at the Taoist Health Institute in Washington, D.C. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY teaches English at the Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School in New York City. He is the author of a forthcoming biography of the art critic and detective novelist Willard Huntington Wright (S.S. Van Dine). . . . RICHARD HORNBY's forthcoming book, *How the Actor Creates*, will be published by Applause Theatre Books this fall.

BERT CARDULLO is co-translator of *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the '40s and '50s*, which is forthcoming from Routledge. He teaches in the theatre department at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. . . . CARYL EMERSON* is Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures and of Comparative Literature at Princeton University. She is the author of *Boris Godunov: Transpositions of a Russian Theme* (Indiana University Press), and, with Gary Saul Morson, co-author of *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford University Press). Other work includes translations of Mikhail Bakhtin (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, and, with Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination*). . . . ROBERT McDOWELL happily lives beyond the boom on a farm in Oregon. . . . DENNIS SAMPSON's most recent book of poems is *Forgiveness* (Milkweed Editions). . . . JAMES FINN COTTER recently published articles on Gerard Manley Hopkins in *Thought* and *The Hopkins Quarterly*.

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Illustrates varying modes of vision in the work of nine French writers. Bishop notes the filiations between romantic irony and forms of "modern irony" (the demonic laughter of Baudelaire and Lautréamont; the perverse laughter of the Decadents; the bitter-sweet laughter of the *poètes fantaisistes*; the mirthless 'dianoetic laughter' of Samuel Beckett) and concludes that romantic irony is "certainly one of the most significant literary expressions of the modern sensibility." $22.95

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IN THIS ISSUE:

Like other modernist works, an Antonioni film designedly disorients us, not to promote confusion but in the recognition that our accustomed ways of making sense are no longer reliable, our received assumptions about the world no longer adequate . . .

—Gilberto Perez, "The Point of View of a Stranger: An Essay on Antonioni's *Eclipse*," p. 234.

Laura Riding, however little known she may be today, was nonetheless one of a handful of the most powerful (in every sense) figures in early twentieth-century Anglo-American literary history. Her plenipotent intellect and personality swept away all resistance, reducing to discipleship, abject servility, or virtual madness anyone who could not manage to shake him/herself free from her mesmerizing, tyrannical influence. . . . She told Geoffrey Phibbs "that she was more than human. They could think of her, if they liked, as a goddess; she was certainly a figure of destiny, or (as she herself preferred to say) she embodied 'Finality.'" When she lost sexual interest in Graves, she announced that sexual intercourse was passé and that bodies had had their day.

—Harold Fromm, "Myths and Mishegaas: Robert Graves and Laura Riding," p. 189.

. . . Ackroyd's major emphasis seems to me indisputable: that the most serious influence on Dickens' art was the theater as an "enchanted place"—"a kind of dream, in which all the restrictions and difficulties of conventional reality fell away." From the days when he and his school friends would put on little plays in the kitchen of a friend's house, to the final grueling performances of his works before delighted audiences, the theater was no less than everything to his imagination. Indeed much of his "real life" became theater, often of a garish and lurid sort.

—William H. Pritchard, "The Exaggerator," p. 301.

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